

Belayed Gratification

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Belayed Gratification

by [quona \(enneadic\)](#)

Summary

Crowley is a professional rock climber and hobbyist dirtbag of middling YouTube fame. He accidentally signs a contract to be the subject of a documentary (he has massive ADHD, okay? Nat put the doc in front of him and he just signed the damn thing without reading, could have happened to anyone!)

Aziraphale is a film documentarian working under a restrictive and creatively stifling contract with Heaven's Gate Studios. His shithead boss, Gabriel, informs him that his next documentary topic will be sport climbing. Guess who the subject is?

This is a human AU slow burn on a geologic timescale. It is going into Daddy Kink territory. You have been warned. Govern yourself accordingly.

Base Camp

Chapter Notes

I wrote this fic on a dare. It is 165,000 words long.

Catch me on:

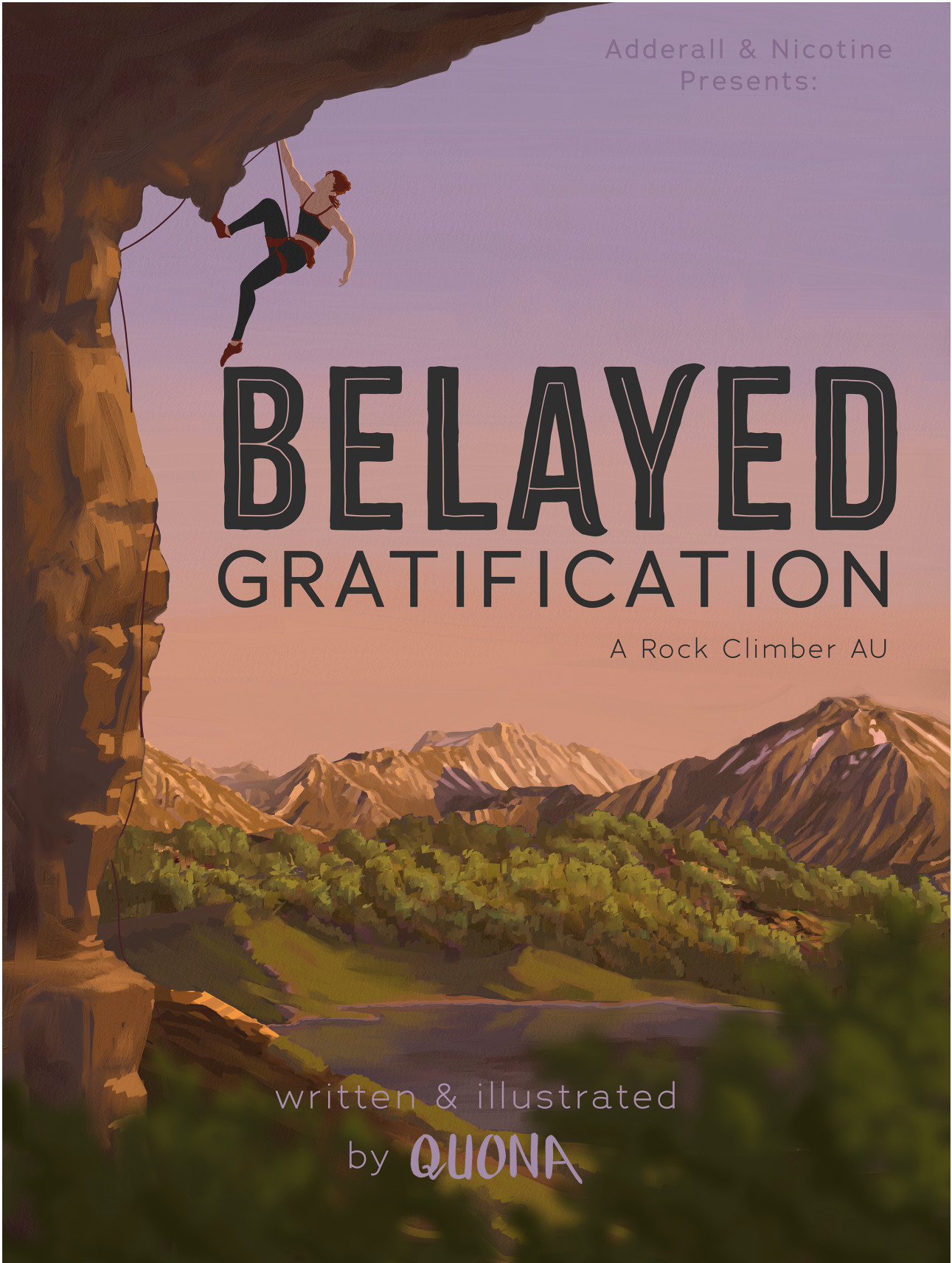
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See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)



Adderall & Nicotine
Presents:

BELAYED GRATIFICATION

A Rock Climber AU

written & illustrated
by **QUONA**

What reviewers are saying...

“Quona reminds us with this fic why literature is so important. And that not everyone can write. No, seriously.”

— NaroMoreau

“In this masterclass of ‘what not to do’, Quona proves yet again it’s not the size of the vocabulary, it’s what they do with it that counts.”

— ukcalico

“I’m not sure what this fic is supposed to be, but none of the answers are good.”

— TawnyOwl95

“Words escape me. Unfortunately they did not escape from the pure Hell Quona put them through in some misguided, churlish attempt at what can barely be called storytelling. Muses everywhere would weep if they could bring themselves to bother feeling anything but contempt.”

— TheScholarlyStrumpet

“Undeniably the most pathetic excuse for filth I have permitted to remain un-nuked on my prestigious subreddit. Quona has given us a new bar to limbo under.”

— Soggyfritter, /r/GoodOmensAfterDark

“So, uh... HOW much do we have to read about rock climbing before we get to the fucking?”

— CemeteryAngel725

“I have no idea what the fuck is wrong with this author, but they should stick to painting.”

— QUONA

Chapter End Notes

This fic is completely written.

I can lie to you and say that I will post super regularly, but we both know that isn't true. However, I can absolutely tell you that this fic will be fully posted.

Head Jam

Chapter Notes

FIRST CHAPTER BABY, HERE WE GOOOOOOOOOO

Catch me on:

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Crowley

Crowley heaved himself up over the craggy, sandy lip of the rock face with a grunt, forearms like jelly and thighs burning acutely. His orange-red hair plastered to his filthy face, hands caked in a paste of sweat, rock muck, and white climbers' chalk. Unpleasant, sure, but blissfully secondary to the thrill of topping out on *Ars Serpentina*, the twisty, overhung, ridiculously technical 5.14c^[1] route he'd sent^[2] the first time more than a decade ago, when he'd first glanced against the sharp, gritty edges of fame.

Well, fame or something like it. Fame *for a rock climber*. Which is to say that gear endorsement deals with Petzl or Black Diamond or La Sportiva and some enthusiastic YouTube channels devoted to live reacting to his climb videos. Not like... *actual* fame, fortunately. The thought of real fame made him want to unclip his harness and roll over the edge of the bluff. He didn't need any more rat-mustached thirteen-year-olds critiquing his climbing form via shitpost than he already had.

Crowley scuttled around the loose, dry gravel and small, scrubby plants, wincing in sympathy as some small rocks plummeted toward Nat below.

"Rocks!" he yelled over the edge, hoping Nat would hear it in time. She had a helmet, of course, but it never hurt to give a heads up.

"I fucking see that, thanks!" she yelled back, though from this height her voice was a minuscule echo.

He unwound the rope tied into his hip harness from around his aching legs, plopped himself to the ground with an exhausted, heaving sigh, and dangled his feet over the ledge. He basked for a moment in the vertigo, the sparkle-vision oxygen-deprived head swim. His hanging toes were numb in his extra fancy custom Crowley-endorsed climbing shoes (*Coming soon to an R.E.I.*^[3] *near you!*) that he took so much hell for in the comments of the aforesaid YouTube videos.

Deservedly so, he thought. What kind of pompous prick has their own shoe line? Anthony J. Crowley, apparently.

It's me. I'm the pompous prick.

Crowley took each achy ankle into hand to shuck his shoes off with a long, low groan that was only slightly performative. He grimaced at the renewed blood flow to his toes. That was always his least favorite part, feeling his toes again as the compression of his ridiculous red and black snake print shoes released.

He abandoned the shoes to his side for the moment and scrubbed his face with the hem of his sweaty, cropped shirt. He wasn't sure if rubbing his gross shirt on his grosser face made the situation any better, but it felt nice and that had to count for something.

Wait—was that blood on his face?! Fuck. When had that happened?

Serps never got any easier, just... less unknown.

The bottom third of *Ars Serpentina* —he'd been the first successful ascender and thus named the route—was a distressingly glass-smooth rock face with finger and toe holds that might as well be bullet holes for all the good they do you. That was the situation for the first twenty-five feet of climbing. He'd grouched time and again while trying and failing to conquer the bottom third that he'd be better off not having arms and legs at all for that section. He could just stick to the goddamn rock and slither up!

That first sequence of *Serps* did a good job to get the pump going in your forearms early in the climb so that you're nice and worn out—Crowley snorted at this—before encountering the middle third: a long, convoluted, twisty crack in the wall that required any aspirant ascender to bodily wedge themselves into the grodiest, spideriest bit of rock-based misery he'd ever seen. After full-body shimmying like a particularly graceless snake (or a mouse being slowly digested *by* a snake, perhaps) up through the crack and spending far too much energy on rope management in the constricted space, the final third of *Serps* loomed ominously overhead.

The final sequence of *Ars Serpentina* was a treacherous overhang that was possibly more difficult to transition into, what with the climber's arms behind functionally bound to their sides through the better part of crack shimmy, than to actually traverse. That's what climbers called the *crux* move of a climb: the most troublesome parts to maneuver. When Crowley bolted the anchors for *Serps* back in the day, he'd fallen between the first and second clips of the overhang while trying to set the third anchor more often than not. Hell, he'd fallen on it *today*.

Fortunately, Nat ("Not Anathema, *Anthony*, that name is ridiculous.") was the most experienced belayer^[4] in the world for this route, and she knew exactly when and how to manage the rope for the transition through the crux. She payed out the line just as Crowley popped out of the rock crack like a plastic snake exploding out of a prank Pringles can and seemed to have an eerie sixth sense for when he was going to miss the first finger hold and needed rope slack taken up. Nat had been there, after all, through every one of Crowley's miserable, early attempts at *Serps* and had sobbed with relief and screamed and whooped with him when he finally topped out the first time and declared the route his own.

Crowley was often miserable and grouchy while he climbed, really. It was a wonder that Nat dealt with his bullshit for all these years. Climbing *hurt*, and Crowley wasn't above bitching about it loudly and often.

“Why the fuck am I doing this again?” he’d ask, staring dramatically skyward, as if imploring God Herself for answers, and Nat would level him with *that look* she had—the deadpan stare of a long-suffering comrade, the one that made him huff and grouse a bit more.

“Why the fuck does ANYONE climb rocks?” he’d carry on. Another look from Nat, more grouse.

“And whose bright idea was it to make this my job, anyway?” A third look, a roll of her eyes. Crowley would finally crack a smile. Asking Nat dumb rhetorical questions was also part of his job, he figured.

There at the crest of *Serps* though—with the wind whipping in his face and threatening to steal the breath from his very lungs, the sun baking his damp skin dry, the pain in his muscles abating to a dull throb, and a panoramic view of the mountains before him—Crowley had certainty. He was certain that the only thing he was ever truly meant to do was to ask questions like: “But *why* can’t I climb that? Just because no one has ever done it? Fuck you, I’ll climb it!” And then flick double birds and scale the rock like a fucking mountain goat with an attitude problem.

Asking questions that no one else wanted to ask; that was his job—he made that his job, for better or worse. Did it get him into trouble? Sure, plenty. Most sponsors would rather he shut the fuck up and wear the gear with a big cheesy grin and a thumbs up. But, more often than not, asking the obnoxious, nitpicky questions kept him and his fellow climbers safe. He was proud of that bit, and he’d gladly take the fall time and time again if it meant his name wasn’t attached to some piece of shit gear or sketch-as-fuck technique that got people killed.

But the point was... the point was that the catharsis of suffering through such intense physical and mental strain just to take that first big breath at the top of the wall and finally, *finally* let every muscle relax—there was nothing like it. The adrenaline high alone couldn’t be touched, no matter how fast and reckless he drove in his ridiculous shitbox car (nicknamed The Bentley out of sheer irony) or which sketchy club drug he tried with Nat in some hole in the wall “nightclub” with dirt floors and plywood walls in a country whose language he couldn’t speak. Frankly, he’d had orgasms less satisfying than a first ascent on a particularly challenging route. Like *a lot* of them.

Crowley took a moment to lean back on his stinging hands and admire the view from the top of *Ars Serpentina*. Fuck, but it was worth the twenty-five-plus minutes of misery it took to sit there. There was no back path to the top of the cliff that *Serps* slithered up. The only way to see this view was to climb this or the neighboring route, which Crowley had *also* christened three years after *Serps*, another nasty 5.14b he’d named *Serps 2: Snakelectric Boogaloo*. Yes, that was the actual name printed in all the local climbing guides. No, he wasn’t sorry. He’d been shit-wrecked on endorphins when he’d hollered the name down to Nat.

Crowley rummaged with a grubby hand through a sack hanging from one of his gear loops and made quick work of unwrapping the cellophane from his victory sandwich and peeling a tangerine. He felt a little tug on the rope attached to his harness and peeked over the ledge at Nat.

“Gonna go off belay for now, you good?!” she yelled up.

“M’good! Off belay!” he responded around a mouthful of PB&J and unclipped from the rope, then secured the line at the top anchor. It wouldn’t do to need to free solo his way back down. Climbing without the safety of a rope—free soloing—was certainly doable; plenty of climbers did it, but that was not a risk he’d like to take on *Serps*. It always bore remembering that plenty of climbers died while climbing without rope. He’d even known one personally.

That wasn't the best line of thought to be having at the top of a route, though, so Crowley took out his phone to snap some shots of the view and, begrudgingly, some selfies for Newt to post on their socials.

Newt was Nat's partner ("Not my boyfriend, Crowley, I'm fucking thirty-five years old.") and Crowley's hype man. Well, Media-Manager-slash-PR-Man-slash-Business-Manager. Newt was despairingly hopeless with technology, so Nat had spent a good bit of time a few years back setting up some automated social media posting systems to keep Newt from fucking that up too badly. But what Newt lacked in tech skills, he more than made up for with his knowledge of the business of climbing professionally. He kept the content rolling and Crowley's name out there in the mix. Newt had even been a climber himself once, but he never tried to go pro. He'd realized *his* skill lay in bartering on Crowley's skill and left climbing as a hobby.



A digital illustration of Crowley sitting at the top of the rock crag, legs crossed, with a tangerine peel over his teeth while he takes a selfie with his cellphone.

Crowley drew his legs up criss-cross on the boulder he was perched on and snapped a picture with a shit-eating grin and a mouth full of partially chewed PB&J just for Newt. He took another with the tangerine peel over his teeth. Crowley tossed the photos into a draft email to Newt that he'd have to send when they got back to a phone signal and briefly wondered if Newt hadn't had the right idea, keeping climbing a hobby. Crowley's inbox (5,195 unread) was an apocalyptic disaster of inquiries, promo emails, newsletters he'd subscribed to two decades ago and couldn't unsub no matter how often he clicked the damn button, and emails from Nat and Newt with increasingly frustrated subject lines like:

"CROWLEY YOU NEED TO READ THIS ONE -- PETZL GRIGRI DEAL,"

"CROWLEY FFS OPEN THIS EMAIL OR PETZL WILL BACK OUT," and his favorites:

"CROWLEY YOU FUCKING SHITBIRD I WILL DROP THE ROPE NEXT TIME I BELAY IF YOU DON'T RESPOND."

So, of course, he summarily ignored his brimming inbox and dropped his phone back into his zippered pocket. That was an issue for another time, like when Newt or Nat physically confronted him with a copy paper printout of an email that couldn't wait any longer. For now, he'd enjoy his hard-earned tangerine and the spectacular view from the top of *Serps*.

It was early September. Autumn had just begun, so the trees beneath his hard-won perch were turning leaves into a riot of oranges and reds and yellows, stretching clear to the freshly snow-capped mountains on the horizon. *Serps* was always worth the effort to see that vista again. How many people had ever topped out on the route and gotten to see that view? He wasn't the only one, he knew that much. Nat had climbed it plenty of times, of course. But it had to be a terribly small group of folks. *Serps* wasn't an easy route, and the trek to the rock face from the parking spot was a four-mile hike in and four miles out.

It made him feel... special? Which was fucking ridiculous. Crowley was definitely not special. He was a dirtbag, weed-smoking, smart ass rock climber who had spent more years living out of The Bentley than he had in an actual dwelling. If it hadn't been for the inexhaustible benevolence of Nat and Newt allowing him to live in the mother-in-law's suite of their house, he'd probably still be living in The Bentley. And if he hadn't been decently skilled at hauling his stringy meat sack up the side of mountains with his bare hands, he'd probably be working some dead-end job to this day.

Crowley had never been much for school. He did well enough and had sometimes fancied himself going into engineering, at least when the guidance counselors had asked. But he didn't care for reading—the words swam and made his head ache—and he couldn't stomach the idea of spending any more time trapped in an educational system than was legally mandated. He'd graduated early as he could—sixteen years old—and gotten the fuck out of his backwater, East Bumfuck hometown chased hot on his heels by scandal. *Typical Crowley.*

He'd bummed around for years, well into his twenties, couch surfing across the States to climb all the places he'd seen in climbing guides. He was tiny as a teenager even after puberty, tall but lanky, barely a buck twenty soaking wet, ideal for rock climbing. He also had a shockingly low sense of self-preservation, so he was always willing to climb the routes that looked too difficult or make the dyno jump that seemed just a little too far. He'd even done an ill-advised head jam once into a gap in the rock in front of him to take a break while climbing and shake out his tired hands, and Nat was still giving him shit for that dumb ass decision to this day. (“You could have broken your stupid fucking pencil neck, you prick!”)

The rope line beside him quivered again at the anchor. He peered over the edge once more. Nat was waving up at him.

“Ready?!” she yelled up. He held up his hand, three fingers. Three minutes.

He hurriedly repacked his lunch detritus into his gear sack, checked that his equipment was still buckled, double-checked that it was still buckled, and tied back into the rope.

“On belay!” Nat yelled up.

“Belay on!” Crowley returned and sat backwards off the edge of the cliff, sinking into the tension of the rope as Nat began to lower him back to the ground.

There was always a flicker of trust-fear, even with Nat below, even after doing this for years and years. Maybe *especially* with Nat, because she knew how much rope to give him, exactly how much slack he could handle. She wouldn't let him fall, no, but she would let him feel it.

But descents always made his climbey-senses tingle. Statistically speaking, if someone was going to die while rock climbing, it would happen during the descent. The climber is tired, maybe not thinking perfectly straight, and their weight is entirely supported by the belayer. Maybe a miscommunication happens, maybe an anchor that the climber placed on the way up fails when it takes tension for the first time, or maybe the rope is too short on the belayer's end and flies through the belay device.

He and Nat always worked carefully to avoid those sorts of situations, of course, and they'd had good luck so far.

The rope caught his weight, tight and impersonal. He kicked gently away from the wall, legs trembling with fatigue. The world tilted, the horizon slipped a little sideways. The cliff face scraped past under his feet, streaked with chalk and dirt, as he started the slow, swaying descent.

Each bump of rock against his feet jarred something loose inside him. The euphoria drained out with the altitude, gravity tugging it down like sweat through a t-shirt. His shoulders ached. His back spasmed once. He focused on keeping his feet against the wall, his knees loose, his hands off the rope. Muscle memory and exhaustion—those familiar, codependent bastards—guided him more than thought.

Somewhere below, he heard Nat swear. Or maybe that was the wind?

The lower he got, the louder the world became with the rustle of leaves, the shriek of a distant hawk, his own breath. When his feet finally hit dirt and Nat called a clean “Off belay!”, he stood stupidly for a second, unsure if his legs would support him. His hands hung limp at his sides, throbbing, aching.

“Jesus fuck,” he mumbled. “*Serps* always has it out for me.”

“Oh?” Nat chirped, re-coiling the rope like a smug little gremlin. “Did it suck, Crowley? Was it hard? Did you do a big boy climb and now your hands hurt?” She stuck out her bottom lip in a pantomime pout.

He made a vague shooing gesture with one loose arm and collapsed onto the nearest flat rock, boneless. “I’m gonna slap you with the chalk sock.”

She threw a carabiner at his shin. “No, you’re not. You’re fucking useless right now, you lazy sack.”

Crowley closed his eyes and let the sun soak into his skin. This was the part that they never filmed for YouTube: the quiet after, Crowley’s body catching up to his brain, the come down from the high.

No cameras, no spectators, just pain and hard breaths and rock.

He wouldn’t know it for another two hours, but this was the last moment of peace he’d have for a long, long time.

Crowley drove the return trip home that afternoon, after the climbing day finished with both Nat and himself thoroughly scraped up, grimy, and exhausted. Every part of him ached in that good, post-climb kind of way. Dirt was crusted around the edges of his palms, his forearms had rock rash, and his thighs threatened mutiny every time he so much as tapped the brake. It was blissful.

Well, it would have been bliss if Nat weren’t riding shotgun.

That was a mistake on Crowley’s part, the driving arrangement. Nat in the passenger seat with cell signal and nothing to do for the two hour commute but batter the shores of Crowley’s delicate sanity with fucking business inquiries was a dangerous creature.

She was quiet for the first mile, sipping something neon from a Circle K cup. Crowley let himself sink into the rhythm of the drive as the old roads twisted through gold and scarlet Appalachia. The windows were down, and the weather was perfectly balmy. All was well.

Then Nat said, “We got another one from Black Diamond,” holding the too-bright screen too close to her face.

“You could put your glasses back on, probably.”

“I do what I want,” she said petulantly. She always did.

“What does Black Diamond have to say?” Crowley asked, hoping that if he gave her this one, she’d not make him go through the entire roster of emails. He’d hate to be too productive in one day. It was anathema (ha!) to his entire ADHD-addled shitheel rock climber aesthetic that he cultivated so carefully.

“Ahhh... looks like more of the same promo for the harnesses. They just want another set of pictures,” she said.

Crowley made a noise of distress, not unlike a wounded coyote. He hated having ad pictures taken. They always made him feel itchy, like his skin didn’t fit.

Nat grinned without looking up. “Aw, the talent hates being objectified!”

“They always make me look so shiny in those ads! Like some kind of fuckin’ TeenBeat poster, it’s gross.”

“Yeah. More of your gorgeous face and weirdly veiny hands on the ads.” She wiggled her eyebrows like the lecher she was.

“Fine,” he sighed.

“Gods above, don’t sound *too* excited about making money.” She side-eyed him with her lips pursed, but he didn’t respond, pretending instead to be very consumed by changing lanes.

“Oh,” she began again, “there’s a thing here about the documentary too.”

“The what?” he asked, really only to be saying something and appearing alert and aware.

“The docu—Crowley for fucks’ sake, you never read the emails, did you?” She’d put her phone down to openly glare at him.

“No no no, of course I did!” he insisted with one hand raised in submission. It didn’t work.

“You’re such a fucking hack sometimes. You didn’t read shit, and I can tell. The documentary *about you* that *you* agreed to.”

“The WHAT?” he almost swerved off the road, such was the honest, visceral shock. Anthony J. Crowley would agree to a good many things in pursuit of being able to eat at least one meal a day and put gas in The Bentley, but he would *never* agree to a documentary. Especially not a documentary *about him*!

“Fucking shit, keep it to one lane,” she said and relaxed her claw grip on his knee and the passenger door. “Yes, the documentary *about you* that *you* agreed to two months ago. After the business meeting about the shoe sponsorship? I came up to you and had it printed out on actual, honest-to-god paper. You read it, and you said, and I quote, ‘Yeah we can do that.’”

Crowley wished at that moment that he’d ever once had the discipline to develop a mind palace or something, *anything* to keep his memories in some semblance of order. He did remember that business meeting, at least. La Sportiva wanted to make a second version of the Crowley shoe and wanted him to come talk about a possible deal. They’d spent three hours in a meeting room with

mediocre coffee and a couple of very enthusiastic brand outreach folks. He'd been so exhausted by the end that he'd...

He'd...

Oh.

Oh no.

Crowley calmly, so very, very calmly, signaled with his blinker, pulled The Bentley to the shoulder of the road, and parked. He felt like he was in a horror film, turning his head slowly to stare at Nat, his eyes wide and terrified.

He remembered.

"You stupid fuck," she admonished with a smirk and looked back down at her phone.

"They're gonna start shooting the early material in a couple weeks, do some interviews with you about the lead up to the Big Climb," she continued when he didn't respond.

His mouth gaped. The Big Climb was what they called his latest project. That's what they always called his truly career-making climbs, any time he was pursuing one. He'd been working on a new route for two years now, and it was gonna be a ground breaker. No one had ever climbed *anything* to completion on the same rock face as the Big Climb. He'd get to name the entire wall if he got his way.

But he sure as fuck did *not* want to be interviewed about it. Or filmed while falling off it, repeatedly. Or filmed at all, even! Though he always conceded to Newt's "content needs" and let him film when Crowley felt like he'd finally complete a route, that was just Newt and his iPhone.

This was...

This was... another beast, entirely. Exposure. Invasion. Parasitic.

Nat interrupted his panic spiral, casual as anything. "The documentarian is... A. Z. Fell? Know him?"

"Huh-uh," Crowley continued to gape, but shook his head in the negative.

"Ahh, looks like he's done a few docs before." She flitted her thumb across the touchscreen, scrolling quickly. "Oh, quite a few. Well, at least you'll be in good hands!" She was now entirely too chipper and smirky and Crowley sort of hated her a little.

"Hngk."

"So eloquent." She patted him on the knee in a matronizing sort of way.

Crowley, however, turned away from Nat, his eyes casting a glassy, thousand-yard stare through the spotty windshield. His mouth remained agape.

"A documentary?" he rasped after long, silent seconds of horrified contemplation.

"Yup. And close your mouth. You look like a carp."

“Hhhhngk.”

Crowley let his head fall dramatically to The Bentley’s steering wheel, just for the satisfaction of hearing the horn blare.

Aziraphale

If you’d asked Aziraphale at the beginning of his career as a documentarian, “Where do you see yourself in twenty years?” he’d have probably said something high-brow and a bit snobbish about making groundbreaking accounts of cutting-edge scholarly research into history, the arts, literature, *culture*. What would he not have said? “Making true crime docs about three school-aged kids who scammed twenty-five million dollars in Bitcoin out of strangers on the internet” or “interviewing TikTok stars about their meteoric rise to fame via disposable, easily digestible video snippets set to snappy bebop background music.”

And yet there he was, forty-four years old and sixteen years into his career, with an IMDB profile that read more like a grocery store checkout rack gossip rag than a serious academic or cinematic pursuit. He had once more been commanded into Gabriel’s office at Heaven’s Gate Studios (absolutely no relation to the doomsday cult of the same name, Aziraphale had checked) and was getting another dressing down for wanting to exercise some creative freedom over his own career.

“No can do, sunshine,” Gabriel would say in that smug, punchable way he always did.

And Aziraphale would nod and smile and scream internally and say he understood and never, ever fight back like he should. Like he knew he should.

What was the point? The contract was Gabriel’s ultimate defense. It was the law. It was the Word of God. It was The Way That Things Are. *The Great Plan*. Aziraphale had plenty of regrets in life, but none chafed quite so pointedly and thoroughly as his contractual obligations to make salacious, tell-all documentaries at the behest of Heaven’s Gate and Gabriel F. Archer. The F stood for “Fucking,” so far as Aziraphale was concerned.

He didn’t regret the documentary that he had made with the advance proceeds of that contract, not one bit. It was his masterpiece, his ode to old books, dusty tomes, the scholarly and literary pursuits, everything he loved and adored. But the other side of that deal, the part that he really should have brokered much more carefully than his 23-year-old self had done? *That* part had chained Aziraphale’s documentary output to Heaven’s Gate and their demands for... the foreseeable future. When he was in his early twenties, he’d thought that he could churn out ten documentaries in no time flat. Easy peasy! Tickety-fucking-boo!

“You know, I’m willing to throw you a bone, Aziraphale,” Gabriel said. Aziraphale didn’t perk up. He’d had Gabriel throw plenty of “bones” his way, and they were never the type of bones that he—never mind, back on track.

Gabriel continued, “I read over your proposal on that documentary about, ahh... mountaineering? Now that was exciting!” He smiled, wide and bright and so, so punchable. Right in his throat.

Oh, well. Maybe there was hope yet? A rare confluence of interests here betwixt himself and Gabriel.

“Oh? Do you think so?” Aziraphale demurred, trying desperately not to betray the tremor of excitement that coursed up his spine unbidden. Maybe he’d finally get to make a documentary he didn’t hate! Still, he didn’t want Gabriel to get any wild ideas about him being excited about something Heaven’s Gate suggested he do.

“Sure! I think that should be your next one. I’ve gone ahead and had Michael reach out to some potential interviewees on your behalf.”

Well, now, that was... confusing. Aziraphale’s tremor of excitement stopped dead in its nascent tracks. “I don’t... Gabriel, you know that the mountaineers in that proposal have been dead for almost a hundred years? And, and, well—I don’t think there’s any family or witnesses that—”

“Oh, Lord, no Aziraphale. No, no. Don’t be silly. Of course you can’t make a documentary about that. But modern mountaineering? Modern climbing? That is exciting! That is interesting! Just look at the Netflix documentary about what’s-his-name-rock-climber that did so well. THAT is what I want you to do. What we want you to do.” Another punchable smile. The one that cracked across Gabriel’s obnoxious face when he’d Made a Final Decision on Aziraphale’s behalf. It wasn’t even Netflix that made that documentary; it was National Geographic, but Aziraphale wouldn’t argue the point and spend any more time in Gabriel’s weirdly Spartan, sanitized white, hyper-modern office than necessary.

Aziraphale didn’t visibly deflate. He didn’t. He wouldn’t give Gabriel the satisfaction of seeing him crestfallen at the loss, not again. He steeled himself and nodded. “Absolutely. Should I get with Michael on that or...?”

Gabriel looked predatory in a way that Aziraphale always resented. “She’s already forwarded the information to your email. Now, I’m sure you have a lot to prepare, and I don’t want to take up any more of my favorite documentarian’s time.”

Aziraphale knew when he was being dismissed, even with that paper-thin veneer of sickening politeness pasted over it. “I—yes. Yes, I do. Thank you for your time, Gabriel.”

He didn’t shake Gabriel’s hand before leaving, and Gabriel didn’t offer it for shaking. This wasn’t an accord between two equals; these were orders, and Aziraphale was a good soldier who did as he was told. He couldn’t just... not do as he was told.

Aziraphale did, however, have a long and very satisfying scream while sitting in the driver’s seat of his car in Heaven’s Gate’s parking garage. It’d become a bit of a tradition. He’d unlock the door, open the car up, slide into the seat, carefully place his messenger bag on the passenger side, close the door, slide the key into the ignition, and scream until he ran out of air. He had it down to a science. If he didn’t have his Car Scream, he worried he’d snap, run back into Heaven’s Gate, and go berserk one day. And there was so much mess and paperwork in that. He’d really rather avoid the headache.

After he’d caught his breath again, he thought it best to rip off the band-aid on Gabriel’s list of interviewees so he could have a good, sullen rumination session on the drive home. He pulled up Michael’s e-mail, perfunctory and terse as always—minor blessings, Aziraphale supposed—and read through the list.

- Muriel Constable, brand relations for a rock climbing gear brand that Aziraphale had never heard of;
- Anthony Crowley, a professional rock climber;

- Anathema Device, also a professional rock climber; and
- Newton Pulsifer, business manager to Anthony Crowley and Anathema Device.

Aziraphale scrubbed a hand over his face and tossed his phone back into his bag with a world-weary sigh. So this wasn't about mountaineering at all. Not even tangentially. This was about rock climbing. No triumph of the indomitable human spirit over environments not meant to support life—actively hostile to life, in fact—no dramatic tales of life and death on the mountainside, no lovely tangents on the rich history of the sport. This was about a group of fools who risked their lives to go from the bottom of a cliff to the top and then come back down again. Great.

He drove home in dead silence with naught but with his constant companion, deep and resentful frustration. He briefly considered just making the mountaineering documentary anyway and turning that into Gabriel once it was complete. No excuses, no explanations, just a guileless flutter of his eyelashes and delivery of a completed film on the topic of his choice. Heaven's Gate never read his progress reports during filming and production, anyway; he knew that much. He'd been adding complete nonsense to his reports for years and never heard a peep.

"Interviewed President James Madison about his thoughts on the role of cryptocurrency in the modern economy."

"Filmed on location in Atlantis."

"Day travel to the Ninth Circle of Hell for an in-person interview with Judas Iscariot."

Seriously, they never checked.

But he'd probably be sued for breach of contract if he pulled a trick on that scale, and Aziraphale wasn't keen to discover what Heaven's Gate's legal department thought about their golden goose going rogue and revenge-shitting all over the annual film release schedule. No, that level of pettiness was beneath him. Probably. No, definitely beneath him. Most likely.

Shortly after arriving home, Aziraphale changed into his most gratuitously tartan house garb, grabbed his aging laptop and the bag of frozen peas that kept it from catching his duvet on fire, and collapsed into bed with a cup of tea easily at hand. If he was going to have to research something as absurd as rock climbing, he was at least going to be comfortable while doing it. He hunt-and-pecked `w w w . g o o g l e . c o m` into his browser while staring down his nose through his reading glasses. He opened another instance of his browser—not a tab, Aziraphale didn't know how to do tabs—and pulled up the e-mail from Michael as well.

Alright, first name on the list, Muriel Constable, brand relations. Aziraphale rolled his eyes. Pass. He had no interest in toadying to corporate interests in his documentaries, even if Gabriel probably jerked off to the thought of corporate sponsors for his films. Gah, he definitely did not want to consider Gabriel's masturbatory habits. Where did that even come from? Aziraphale shook his head as if to manually dislodge the thought from his mind.

Next name on the list. Anthony J. Crowley, professional rock climber. Aziraphale changed windows again, back to Google.

`A n t h o n y C r o w l e y r o c k c l i m b e r`

Ah! Results!

Anthony Crowley, American Rock Climber. A string of pictures followed, all of a tall, thin man with dark sunglasses and a flaming red mop of hair, each taken in front of sweeping mountaintop vistas. He was grimacing with bared teeth in most of the photos, as if he thought that was how humans smiled and was attempting a pantomime for their benefit. The last few photos, though, the pictures where he was climbing outdoors, now those caught Aziraphale's interest. Mr. Crowley looked for all the world like a gangly spider crab clinging to surfaces that no person in their right mind should expect to hold on to. He looked as if he stood in sheer defiance of the laws of gravity simply because he felt like taking the most direct path to the top of a cliff, and gravity cowed to him.

In one picture, he was fully dangling by his fingertips from the underside of a rock shelf that appeared to be so high up that the air would be thin, rarefied. Aziraphale's breath caught in his chest at the very idea. The next photo was of Mr. Crowley wedged into a gap in some rocks so tightly that he must have been trapped. He'd have needed grease to slither out, surely. In the next image, he was, by all appearances, taking an exceedingly casual rest break while holding a smooth, sheer rock face with one hand jammed into a crack. He could have had a cigarette in his free hand and been casually chatting up a friend, were it not for the vast empty sky behind him and the 90-degree rock wall he clung to. It was absurd.

Aziraphale blinked in disbelief but moved on. Underneath the photos, the page read:

Age, 41 years, born June 6, 1983.

Younger than Aziraphale, but only marginally so. He struggled to reconcile the frankly absurdly lithe yet somehow still middle-aged Mr. Crowley with his own—he glanced down to his stomach—softness. Rude of Mr. Crowley, really. How very dare he?

Underneath his vital statistics: a Wikipedia article that was sparse on personal information but filled with a very, very long list of climbing accomplishments, none of which Aziraphale could truly grasp their importance, but they certainly sounded very impressive. Mr. Crowley even had endorsement deals with companies. He recognized one name as Muriel Constable's outfit.

He clicked on one of the top results without really thinking. No, scratch that—he *had* thought about it, but only in the abstract sense of "this is work" and not "I'm curious about the man with cheekbones like tactical weapons." It was some sort of promotional video. It had a logo in the corner, a grainy intro card, and dramatic drums on the score. It was one of those insufferable sports edits clearly aimed at the Red Bull, testosterone-and-adrenaline crowd, all smoke and stunts with a marketing department that had a drone. Aziraphale prepared himself to be unimpressed.

It opened with Crowley standing casually at the base of a cliff, rubbing chalk onto his hands in cinematic slow motion. His dark sunglasses were perched atop his absurdly sharp nose. His shirt was cropped dangerously short. He had a face tattoo faintly visible next to his ear, which was... something. The voice over said something trite about "pushing limits" and "hearing the rock breathe."

Aziraphale rolled his eyes and reached for his tea.

Then Crowley looked up at the wall.

And— *God* —he smiled.

It wasn't a nice smile; it was feral and electric. It was *problematic*. It was the type of grin a man gives a knife fight. His teeth flashed, his eyes were hidden, and his entire body vibrated with a kinetic sort of threat.

Aziraphale's teacup hovered mid-air, frozen in anticipation.

The next few clips were a montage blur of motion and skin and grit. Crowley moved like a glitch in physics. He was fast and sinuous and grotesquely graceful. Oh, and occasionally upside down for no apparent reason. He made inhuman reaches. He dangled by his fingers. He swung from holds like a chimp possessed. At one point, he leapt sideways in a move that Aziraphale was reasonably certain *should not be possible* for a person with bones.

The camera caught his face in close-up during a shake-out rest. Sweat streaked his cheek, and his mouth opened to breathe just a little. Just enough to see the flash of tongue pressed to teeth. The line of his jaw clenched and unclenched like he was in tense negotiations with a wall that he intended to insult *and* seduce. Aziraphale's laptop whirled as if flustered.

He clicked pause and stared at the frozen image. Not for any reason, mind you. He just needed a moment.

"Well," he said aloud to his empty bedroom, "That's absolutely *insufferable*."

He sat very still for another moment, telling himself that he absolutely should not watch another one.

The smart thing to do, the *professional* thing to do, would be to jot down a few notes and move on to the next name on the list. There was an Anathema person. A Newton someone. There were probably safer, more sensible topics with less... *disturbing musculature* to contend with.

But no, this was proper research. It would be irresponsible not to at least review multiple sources before forming an opinion, right? Right. That was Documentary Ethics 101. He was a *scholar*; damn it. He was a craftsman of narrative. He couldn't build a compelling profile without a thorough investigation.

Thoroughly convinced, he clicked the next video.

This one was less polished, a rawer cut without sweeping drone footage or dramatic score. It was just hand-held camera work and ambient noise. Crowley was halfway up some godforsaken dusty red boulder in Utah, barking expletives at himself and God and grumbling about finger strength. The camera caught him mid-climb, teeth bared in focused frustration, a thick tendon in his neck standing out like a violin string.

"Swear to *Christ*," Crowley muttered, trying to chalk up while hanging one-handed. "If this next hold's a goddamn sloper, m'gonna piss on this rock out of spite."

Aziraphale blinked his dry, dry eyes.

Crowley found the next hold—it was *not* a "sloper," apparently—and let out an animal whoop that made Aziraphale's entire ribcage flutter like a startled bird. He couldn't tell if it was adrenaline or offense or some unholy combination thereof.

At the top of the climb, Crowley stood triumphant and immediately flipped double birds at the landscape, laughing so hard he nearly toppled backwards off the rock while the shot shook with the camera person's shared laughter.

Aziraphale paused the video again.

"Well," he said crisply, "*that* certainly won't be making the final edit."

He sat very still, battling with himself internally. Then he watched the video again. For... editorial reasons.

Aziraphale opened several new browser windows off to one side and began searching for climbing terms. Free solo, trad climbing, sport climbing, multi-pitch... it was like climbers had developed their own secret language, totally opaque to outsiders. What on earth was a grigri, anyway? Aziraphale Google image searched it and stared at pictures of a small metal device that one ostensibly fed rope through but still didn't quite understand how it worked. He noted that down for later research on his bedside notepad but plowed onward for the time being. He just needed to get the lay of the land for now.

Err... the lay of the... mountain? Cliffside? Rock... face? He should probably Google those terms, too.

Aziraphale must have nodded off during his research because he jerked awake around two in the morning, having dreamt of losing his grip and falling from an unforgiving rock wall. He had been researching climbing injuries, given the browser window still open on his screen: "Why Do So Many People Die While Rock Climbing?" He was still sitting with his precariously hot computer in his lap, frozen peas thoroughly melted and sweating a mess through the duvet. He grimaced and plopped the whole mushy package beside his bed. That was something to deal with in the morning.

He tucked himself back into his sheets and slept, dreaming of climbing into the breathless sky.

The next morning Aziraphale felt, if perhaps not optimistic about his latest missive from Heaven's Gate, at least slightly less irritated. If he was honest with himself, he would admit that he'd misjudged rock climbing as a sport, at least a little. It was no Sir Edmund Hillary summiting Everest or Sir Alfred Wills' ascent of the Wetterhorn, but it was certainly more artful than he'd anticipated. And if he were truly wretchedly honest with himself, he'd admit to Googling "Anthony Crowley without sunglasses" immediately upon waking that morning and finding, with great horror, that Mr. Crowley was, in fact, devastatingly handsome.

But that was quite beside the point. Yes, Aziraphale could make something watchable, possibly even interesting, out of Mr. Crowley's sport, provided that the man himself was at least passably personable. The fact that he had a smile like a knife and cheekbones so sharp they could wound a poor old queer's very soul from fifty paces would only help the promotion of the film. (Though one could argue that a warning label would be polite.)

God, that smirk with the one canine caught on his stupidly plush lower lip? How did this man cope with existence, just walking around looking like *THAT* every day of his life? Completely unfair,

Aziraphale thought. Irresponsible. Practically a public health hazard.

Anyway, it didn't matter. Mr. Crowley was almost certainly painfully heterosexual. His climbing partner of two decades, Anathema Device, was surely his wife. They looked cozy in every photo they'd taken together and she was a smoke show, besides. Even Aziraphale's gay-as-the-day-is-long self could see that much. Yes, definitely his wife.

He hadn't saved the photo. Not technically. He'd just bookmarked it. For reference. Composition study. Possibly lighting. One had to understand the subject's bone structure if one was to frame interviews well. It was basic documentary practice. Also, it was deeply unfair, the way Crowley's sunglasses had hidden just how large and arrestingly strange his eyes were—golden, almost. Like some cryptid had learned to wear pants and was now climbing professionally for YouTube likes.

Aziraphale pattered around his kitchen in his tartan slippers with his first cup of tea, notepad in hand to collect the interview questions that rose to mind, from the banal (“Why rock climbing, Mr. Crowley?”) to the salacious (“Given the rate of injury or, worse yet, death, in the sport, don't you think it's irresponsible to be promoting rock climbing?”), to the downright rude (“Do you believe gravity is optional? Is there a spiritual component to nearly dying on camera? Do you ever wear a full-length shirt or is that banned in your subculture?”) He'd need to start calling to set up interviews as soon as possible. He made a note to let Maggie and Nina know about the plan.

Maggie and Nina were a couple, a matched set, and Aziraphale's long-time cinematographers and collaborators. They ran the most flawless good-cop-bad-cop routine on interviewees that Aziraphale had ever witnessed. They had a real knack for getting even the most reluctant subjects to tear open their chests and present their thumping hearts in outstretched palms for the camera. Maggie was the soft touch, easy to relate to with her heart so perpetually on her sleeve, a big, sunny smile, and a freely offered shoulder to cry on. Nina was Maggie's antithesis, hard-nosed and commanding, a little cold until you really knew her, and absolutely dogged in seeking answers when she smelled fear.

Equally important, Maggie and Nina shot beautiful film. Aziraphale marveled at the raw footage they captured and had spent many a long night waffling between this clip or that clip, knowing full well that he couldn't fit every bit of the cinematic masterpieces they managed to wrench out of the most mundane topics into the typical ninety-minute film. Some the most heartbreaking moments in his career, Heaven's Gate's contractual strangleholds aside, centered on deciding against a tender, emotional shot that Maggie captured when a subject finally saw their own flaws laid out before them like Polaroids or choosing to cut one of Nina's explosive, dynamic shots of an interviewee lashing out when they were pressed too hard.

They had a language of glances and half-phrases, a rhythm that made Aziraphale feel like an old piano slightly out of tune. He'd never had someone like that—not really. Never found a person who clicked into him like a keystone and said, ‘yes, you, always you.’ The closest he'd gotten was a man who shared a toothbrush holder for eight months and disappeared with the salt grinder.

Aziraphale's phone rang on the countertop. Nina, speak of the devil.

“Good morning, my dear. How are you?”

“Mister Fell.” She still called him that, even after all these years. “Michael told me to prep for a series of first-round interviews.” Always to the point, Nina was.

“Ah, yes. It would appear that we have a new directive from Gabriel about the next film. Rock climbing, I’m told.” Aziraphale hated the nervous waver in his voice. He always felt like he was seeking Nina’s approval. As if displeasing her with their film projects would be the final straw in their professional relationship, and she would take Maggie and move on.

“Mm. Alright.”

Aziraphale continued, “Yes, well, I’ve got a list of interviewees—”

“Michael forwarded those to us, too. Maggie is on the phone with ‘em this morning getting it set up.”

“Well, Maggie is a paragon of efficiency, as always!” He really was grateful for the hard work Maggie always put into connecting with their subjects.

“She is, isn’t she?” Nina couldn’t keep the smile out of her tone. Maggie was Nina’s soft spot, perhaps the only soft spot. Nina held all her grins for Maggie, all of her comforting words for Maggie, all of her hugs and her affection for Maggie. Aziraphale was in awe of their relationship and a little envious. He’d never found someone who fit him so well as Maggie and Nina complemented each other.

“She is,” he said.

“We’ll get back to you on dates and times for the first round. Need me to start research?” Nina asked.

“Oh, would you? I’ve done a bit myself, mostly into Mister Crowley, but it seems that this rock climbing business is a bit more complex than I’d thought. I’d be so grateful.”

There was a pause on Nina’s end of the line. It sounded as if Nina mouthed something inaudibly to Maggie. He heard Maggie say something, though he couldn’t make it out, and Nina replied, “Mhm,” in that knowing tone she often wielded like a weapon.

“Alright, Mister Fell, we’re on it.”

“Thank you, Nina,” he spoke a little louder, now realizing he’d been on speaker the whole time, “and thank you, too, Maggie!”

“You’re welcome, Mister Fell!” Maggie yelled. She called him Mr. Fell, too, at least when Nina was around.

Nina hung up with no further fanfare, and Aziraphale couldn’t help but smile. Even if the topic of the documentary wasn’t his choice, working with Maggie and Nina was always a delight.

He finished his tea. He absolutely did not Google that picture of Mr. Crowley without sunglasses a second time. And even if he did, he certainly did not save the high-resolution version. And *even if* he did that, it was purely for color reference. For grading. Something technical. He was nearly positive there was a legitimate reason.

It was definitely not his phone background now. That would be ridiculous. Unprofessional. Possibly actionable.

[1] Outdoor climbers use grading systems to describe the difficulty of a climbing route. These grading systems are highly subjective, but helpful for most climbers to judge whether they have the skill level to attempt a climb.

The Yosemite Decimal System (“YDS”) is the most common grading system in the U.S. There are three parts to a YDS grade: (1) the first number (1-5) tells us the Class of the hike, scramble, or climb, where Class 1 is flat land and Class 5 is a rock wall that requires gear; (2) the second number tells us the difficulty of the climb (2-15), based on the most challenging move in the route; and (3) the letter after the grade (a-d) gives more specificity to the difficulty of the route, where a 5.11a route would feel closer to a 5.10, a 5.11d route would feel closer to a 5.12.

Ars Serpentina, as a 5.14c, would be a very challenging climbing route that typically only professional climbers would be capable of completing. [\[return to text\]](#)

[2] In rock climbing, to “send” a climbing route means to finish it. [\[return to text\]](#)

[3] R.E.I. is Recreational Equipment, Inc., a popular American outdoor recreation store. [\[return to text\]](#)

[4] A belayer is the person that remains on the ground (or at least somewhere below the active climber) and controls the safety rope to reduce the distance that a climber might fall, should they slip. [\[return to text\]](#)

Exposure

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale and Crowley meet as the first-round interviews for the documentary begin.

It doesn't go well.

Chapter Notes

Wooooo thanks for the incredible response on the first chapter. I'm still working my way through the comments to reply to as many as I can, so if I haven't replied yet, I will soon as I can.

Here is the second chapter.

I'm releasing these as I finish the art for them, so my posting schedule is less of a schedule and more of a pleasant surprise for you and me both. Sometimes the turnaround between chapters will be quick (like this one was) and sometimes it'll be a hot minute.

Catch me on:

[Bluesky](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Xitter](#)

[Or the Belayed Gratification Discord server](#)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Crowley

5:30 AM. Crowley woke, slapped at his phone's obnoxiously chipper alarm chimes, and rolled out of his near-irresistibly warm bed with a grunt. He changed to his lazy climbing day gear as he hopped from foot to foot to keep his toes from freezing (ridiculous looking for a man his age, but he could hardly care), and left for the climbing gym with a spectacularly massive thermos of coffee in hand. He'd normally not get up this early to go practice, but the owner had given him keys to the back door of the gym floor a couple of years back in case he wanted to climb outside of hours. And he needed to climb before he faced the cameras and the grilling he would surely receive about every minor aspect of his life. His brain would be too itchy if he didn't. They might even want to hear about his feelings, God forbid.

When he arrived at the gym, his shitty hatchback was the only car in the parking lot, which was the way he liked it. He wouldn't do any risky climbing while in the gym alone; that was a younger, stupider man's game, but a couple of hours on the bouldering routes were a good way to clear the

screaming stress gremlins from his mind. He unlocked the gym, tossed down his gear bag, chalked his hands up, and set about utterly destroying his grip strength for the day.

He started with a couple of warm-up boulder problems, simple stuff to get the joints loose. He wasn't the spring chicken he used to be, and things had definitely started creaking a lot more in the last few years. He'd been lucky in his career to never suffer any truly major climbing injuries, which he figured was as much dumb luck as it was his propensity to double-check gear every time. Small blessings.

Boulder problems were low to the floor and didn't require gear, so they were usually a safer bet for climbing alone. Plus, they did a good job at occupying his mind—less about stamina or raw strength than about problem solving. How can I climb from the bottom of this to the top of this, given a limited number of hand and toe holds? How can I manipulate my body to make this move? Sometimes just muscling through a boulder problem would work but, more often than not, the best move was delicate and graceful, playing to balance and technique. That took some brainpower.

Unfortunately for Crowley, his mind could take Olympic gold in overthinking handily. Or at very least a strong podium placement. He'd get a medal, for sure.

He really, *really* did not want to do this documentary. He didn't want or need that kind of stress on the Big Climb. There were entirely too many expectations, and he hated the expectations of others worming their way into his climbing. Of course they'd want him to successfully complete the climb to give their stupid fucking film a satisfying end. Dramatic music swells, a panoramic view of Crowley topping out on the rock, sweaty but triumphant, shots of people crying with relief and hugging. That kind of external pressure couldn't be safe. What if it influenced his decision-making while climbing?

There's an idea! He could call it off for safety, he'd just say that having the documentary crew there distracted him too much, it put him and his team at risk. That could work.

Nat's immediate objections leapt to mind, unbidden. That acerbic look of pure disbelief that she would give him, the 'Are you fucking kidding me right now, Crowley? Who do you think I am?' look. Alright, maybe that wouldn't work.

Nat and Newt were smug about the situation Crowley found himself in; he could feel it, and it made him prickly. They had been smug for days leading up to the filming, reveling in Crowley's discomfort at being perceived. Perceived at a high level, even! Filmed! The indignity of the whole affair had left him grumpy and listless for a week now. The last thing he wanted to do was be documented talking about himself to complete strangers. He barely wanted to talk about himself to Nat, and he'd literally had his life in her hands regularly for well over a decade.

Maybe he could fake an injury. Hell, maybe he could twist an ankle right here and now in the climbing gym and call the whole film off. Okay, that was a little dramatic. He still needed to actually work on the Big Climb over winter, not recuperate a bum leg. Nevertheless, Crowley felt more than a little desperate, and that made him flighty. Just call him Anthony J'Avoidant Behavior Crowley.

He let himself drop from the top of the boulder wall to the gym floor. He always liked the satisfying *thunk* of his feet in climbing shoes as he landed. He re-chalked his hands and moved to a harder set of boulder problems with little, fiddly hand and toe holds and big, sweeping moves that required the climber to take a leap of faith with their ability to close the gaps from one position to the next. Funny how he could so easily take those leaps in climbing and so rarely in the rest of life.

Climbing didn't ask much from him, was the thing. Not really. Sure, it was an intensely physical sport with twice as much mental game, but it was always the same known unknowns.

Are my harness, rope, and clips safe and double-checked? Always. He knew better than to be a fool about gear safety. There were old climbers and there were reckless climbers, but no old, reckless climbers.

Do I have the cardiovascular endurance to finish a route? Usually he did. Even if not, Crowley was never averse to improving his fitness to accomplish a climb he'd set his mind on. He had a little second-hand treadmill at the house that he'd put a few miles on several times a week and be fighting fit in no time.

Is the skin on my fingertips going to hold up to this high-grit sandpaper of a rock face? Often no, but he didn't really give a fuck about the old, healed blister flappers peeling off his fingers, never had. He wasn't going to be a hand model for Tag Heuer any time soon.

Are there any moves that I just physically can not perform? If so, why? Is there a better way to make that move, then? Those questions were a little tougher, but that was half the fun of the climb to Crowley: puzzling out the route.

How much exposure do I have while I'm up on the wall? Ah, now that was a truly sticky question, the type of question that kept plenty of folks from climbing at all, especially if one harbored any fear of heights. Exposure meant risk while climbing, and climbing was full of risks. Exposure was being in too remote of a location for rescue services to come get you if you fell and crushed a leg. Exposure was being too far above your last protective anchor into the rock. Exposure was the distance you would fall if you slipped. Exposure was danger.

Questions, questions, questions, but at least the answers were always attainable given enough time to plan and re-work and organize. He might not walk up to any given rock wall and instantly know the solutions to those problems, but he definitely knew his angle of attack to figure it out.

In painfully stark contrast, he hadn't the slightest iota of a clue how to handle the documentary, assuming Nat wouldn't fall for any of the myriad excuses he would ply her with to get out of it. He didn't want to be any more known than he already was; he didn't climb for attention. He didn't have anything to prove to anyone. Things to prove to himself? Oh, absolutely. But not to some random fucker on their couch eating snacks while they browsed Netflix. *Oh fuck, would it be on Netflix?* No, no, no. That was far too much exposure.

That afternoon, Crowley found himself held hostage. Kept under duress. It was an absolute violation of his free will.

At least that's what he insisted, loudly and often, to Nat and Newt for the rest of the morning after he'd returned from the climbing gym. They had him in a hostage situation, keeping him under threat of pain and dismemberment in their living room, which had been cleaned and dressed to the nines for the first set of interviews with A.Z. Fell and his film crew.

He met Maggie and Nina. Maggie was effervescent and, frankly, a little much. Nina was more Crowley's speed. He and Nina had shared perhaps six words total between them since the crew's arrival at the house, and that suited Crowley just fine. He didn't care for being tittered at and fussed over like Maggie so clearly needed to do, but he also sensed that if he were to express any displeasure about Maggie, Nina might pull his spine out of his asshole. So Crowley kept his mouth firmly, resolutely shut.

The doorbell chimed obnoxiously and interrupted Crowley's sour musings.

"Bet that's Mister Fell," Nina said, and Newt moved to open the door and welcome him in.

Crowley was not prepared for A. Z. Fell. How could he have been? The man bustled in, looking entirely harried, with a pen tucked behind each ear, a straining messenger bag strapped across his body, and a bankers' box so full that the lid couldn't close. Fell paused in the doorway and, upon seeing the small group assembled in Nat and Newt's living room, seemed to melt into a thousand-watt smile.

"Hello, everyone." He seemed so pleased to see them, as if he was coming home for the holidays after years in the field.

Maggie and Nina helped him set up for the interview, took the box from his hands, divested him of his bag, pulled a chair over, and fiddled with the cameras. Newt offered drinks, which Crowley waved away grumpily, but Fell politely accepted.

"Oh, that'd be lovely, my dear boy! Just a glass of water is fine, thank you so much."

Crowley hadn't been prepared for Fell to be so teeth-achingly affable. That was going to make it harder to be an asshole to him. And when Fell turned with a stack of messy notes in hand to face Crowley, he realized he hadn't been prepared to be the sole focus of that startling blue gaze, either.

Fell took a deep breath with a wide smile. "Well, my apologies for running a bit behind. I trust Maggie and Nina have taken good care of you so far?"

Crowley only nodded, but Nat, the traitor, jumped in to say, "They've been great so far! We really appreciate you all taking the time to come out here and do this with us. We're excited for the opportunity to show everybody what Crowley can do."

Crowley twisted up a sour face to her. *Really?*

"As am I! This is a very exciting sport and Mister Crowley appears to be at the pinnacle of his field. This is quite the opportunity for us, as well." Fell was too jovial. Crowley wanted to vomit.

"For that matter, Mister Crowley, a pleasure to finally meet you." Fell stuck his hand out.

Crowley gave him a quick courtesy shake and said, rather gruffly, "Just Crowley."

"Crowley, then! I'm Aziraphale, and I am the director of this—of your documentary." Another thousand-watt smile.

What kind of name was Aziraphale? Was this dude in some religious cult? Or maybe he was the guy that made documentaries about leaving fundie cults. Why was he there making a documentary about a dirtbag rock climber, of all people?

“Hm,” was all Crowley could muster. A grunt of acknowledgment, at best. Honestly, it was hard to maintain a resilient facade of “I don’t give a fuck” in the face of Fell’s blazing positivity, but Crowley felt up to the challenge. Spite was an excellent motivator.

Maggie chimed in, “Exposure on the shot looks good, Mister Fell. I’m all set here.”

“Well, ahh... shall we get started, then?” Fell—Aziraphale thanked Maggie and smiled at Crowley again. Crowley felt his resolve weaken a bit.

“Alright,” Crowley said and wiped his suddenly sweaty palms on his jeans.

Aziraphale shuffled his notes, then nodded to Maggie and Nina in turn, who had taken their places behind his chair, across from Crowley, with camera and sound gear.

“Sound speed,” Nina said, and Maggie confirmed with, “Camera!”

“Whenever you’re ready, Mister Fell.” Nina nodded back to Aziraphale.

“So, Crowley, thank you for sitting for this first interview,” Aziraphale began.

“Sure.”

“We should probably start with the basics,” Aziraphale continued.

“Good a place as any.” Crowley gave a one-shouldered shrug of purest nonchalance.

“And,” Aziraphale glanced down at his notes, shuffled them again, “could you just start with giving your name and what you do? Something like ‘I’m Anthony Crowley, and I’m a professional rock climber,’ or however you’d prefer to say it.”

“Uh, yeah. ‘M Crowley, and I climb rocks for money.”

Aziraphale made a strange face. Almost a wince, Crowley thought.

“And ahh... how long have you been climbing for?” Aziraphale asked.

“Long time.”

Another wince, this one a little more obvious.

“Since you were a kid, then?” Aziraphale re-shuffled his notes. It looked like a nervous tic.

“Mmhm.”

“And... did you—did you climb while for your school?” Aziraphale appeared to be regrouping, shifting tactics. Crowley swore he saw a bead of sweat on his brow.

“Nope,” Crowley said and picked at a bit of lint on his shirt.

Aziraphale suddenly seemed to pick up on Crowley’s strategy. He glanced up from his interview notes with an unamused, nay, thoroughly aggrieved look in his eye that made Crowley want to giggle and kick his feet if he weren’t already so committed to being a sour bastard today.



"So it was an after-school hobby," Aziraphale said flatly.

"Yep."

"Why did you choose rock climbing?" Aziraphale was nearly glaring at that point.

"Liked it." Understatement of a lifetime, that was, but Crowley was feeling petty.

"What did you, or, I suppose, do you like about it?" Aziraphale tried again. Crowley had to commend his commitment to the bit.

"S'hard. Fun. Pretty places," Crowley said, feeling rather generous with that answer.

"Mister Crowley—"

"Just Crowley," he interjected with a smirk.

"Crowley, yes, of course." Aziraphale gritted his teeth. "Crowley, are you determined to answer all of my questions so tersely?"

"M'not."

Aziraphale looked flabbergasted by his denial. "You... you absolutely are!"

"Nah," he said, and Crowley swore he could see a little vein pulse in Aziraphale's forehead.

“I—I’m just—Do you...” Aziraphale fished around for a response, clearly unmoored by an uncooperative star of this documentary.

Aziraphale sighed and turned to Maggie. “Let’s cut for a minute.”

“Alright, Mister Fell, take your time.” Maggie nodded while Nina hummed in agreement.

When Aziraphale turned back to face Crowley, Crowley was grinning. Apparently, that was the last straw.

“Oh, really now!” Aziraphale tossed his papers down with a fluttering *thwump* and stood in a huff, now openly glaring. Crowley’s grin wavered a bit as if he was trying to stifle a laugh.

Nat chose that moment to intervene, much to Crowley’s chagrin. He was having fun with this! “Crowley, a word, please?” She raised her eyebrow at him and pointed to the hallway that led to the kitchen. He snickered and stood from The Interrogation Chair and excused himself from the room with the air of an imp of a child being taken to task by their mother.

In the kitchen, Nat rounded on him whip-fast and poked an accusatory finger into his chest. “You’re being an asshole.” Her mouth was set in a firm line. That was Nat’s serious face.

“Am not,” he said. *Good one, Crowley.*

Nat huffed her disbelief. “You are, I know you. You’re not the most verbose fucker I’ve ever known, but you aren’t this petty piece of shit. You’re going to ruin the best opportunity you’ve had for your career in a while.”

Crowley rolled his eyes, crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t need a fucking documentary for my career.”

Nat huffed again, turned away, and tossed her hands in the air. “Gods above, help me, I will throttle this man as he stands here.”

“Nat—”

She rounded on Crowley once again. “No, no no. You listen to me, Anthony.” *Oh no, the first names were out.* “You signed up for this, whether you meant to or not. There is a contract now. Consequences of your own decisions. And boy, the conses do quence, don’t they?”

“But I—” he tried to interject.

Nat wasn’t having any of his bullshit. She put a hand up to silence him. “Shut the fuck up. I’m telling you how this is going to go. You have a contract to do this documentary. We’ve already been paid money for the appearance. And besides that, this could absolutely make you. This is a massive opportunity to get your name out there. Do you know how many climbers would crawl through glass for something like this?”

“Nat, I already have endorsements and—”

“Yeah, you have some endorsements, but you’re fucking forty-one years old and you live in my basement and drive a hatchback that, frankly, could explode at any moment. And that’s fine, it really is! For you. But what we do is expensive, you know that. All the travel, all the climbing gear we still have to pay for, even if some of it is free swag, sure, all the food and the training gear. And

what about money to get us through the off seasons? What about retirement? My job is also dependent on what you do. And so is Newt's. We're a team, here. And you need to take. One. For. The. Fucking. Team. Got it?" By the end of what Crowley assumed she intended as a motivational speech, she was poking him in the sternum to emphasize her point, one word at a time.

Crowley stood in stunned silence for a moment, eyebrows raised and eyes wide. He was irritated that Nat was right, but right she was.

"Y-yeah," he said. "Okay, fine."

"Good," Nat said, and gave him a little pat on the chest.

Crowley regrouped himself and huffed, "Fine. But I'm not doing that interview today. I'm too worked up now and you know how I get, Nat."

Her expression softened a bit. She did know how he got when the anxiety spiral started turning, dragging him down. She sighed, a little fond and a little exasperated, "Yeah, okay. Let's see if they can do my interview today, huh? I don't mind. We can get you on the schedule for another day and you can work on getting your shit together between now and then."

He nodded, let out a shaky breath, and ruffled his hand through his hair. "Yeah. Yeah, I can do that."

Nat smiled at him. "Alright. You go hole up and I'll handle the film crew. It'll be alright." She gave his chest another quick pat and left him in the kitchen.

He'd bought himself at least one more day of reprieve, which was good. He needed more time to figure out his exposure.

Aziraphale

Aziraphale thought it was a real crying shame that Anthony Crowley, professional rock climber, turned out to be such a massive, raging asshole.

Figures, though. You can't look that good and also have a personality that people who weren't raised by wolves can bear to be around, that would cause too much disorder in the universe. That's too much power for one human being to safely wield.

Aziraphale wasn't green on interviewing people, even hostile people. Not by a very, very long shot. Plenty of folks got aggressive or cagey or completely shut down and started pleading the fifth (as if this was open court and Aziraphale was prosecuting them!) when they were being grilled about something emotionally sensitive, or something that was their own fault. But Crowley's complete belligerence was an unpleasant surprise. Didn't Crowley want to be interviewed for this? It was his documentary! This was about his life's work! A celebration of his sport and achievements!

Aziraphale took a shaky sip from his glass of water and sat back in his chair as Nat and Crowley retreated to the kitchen for their sidebar. He'd need to get his jangled nerves soothed before they resumed this interview. Crowley had goaded him into losing his temper and that was patently

unprofessional on Aziraphale's part. He'd apologize and try again. Maybe they could simply start over and salvage some of today's interviewing efforts. He could at least hope for that much.

But only Nat returned from the kitchen. Aziraphale smiled and raised his brows at her expectantly, and she responded with a sheepish, apologetic grimace.

"I'm so sorry, he's not usually—Crowley's having a tough one today. Anxiety or something. I really am sorry for how he behaved. I took him to task and sent him to his room to think about what he's done."

Newt snorted from across the room.

Nat continued, "Could we do my interview today instead? Or Newt, if you plan on interviewing him. That'd be okay, yeah, babe?"

Newt shrugged in an amiable, easy-going way that Aziraphale suspected was characteristic of him: going with the flow.

Aziraphale smiled again. "Yes, I think we could make that work. Either one of you, really, though I think I'd be more prepared to repurpose my questions for Crowley with you, Miss Device."

"Nat is fine. Okay, let's do that!" She sat across from Aziraphale and tried her best to look contrite on someone else's behalf.

Aziraphale picked up his notes from the floor and shuffled through them with a thoughtful little wrinkle on his forehead. He plucked the dog-eared page he was looking for from the now messy stack and looked at his crew. "Well, let's give this another whirl! Maggie, Nina?"

Maggie and Nina both resumed their filming positions, if a little warily, and answered in the affirmative.

Aziraphale cleared his throat. "Right. Well, let's start with the usual. Could you give us your name and what you do? Something like 'My name is Anath—Nat, sorry—Nat Device and I am a professional rock climber' and tell us how long you've been climbing. Just a brief introduction to get us going."

Nat settled into the interview chair and put on a game face. "Sure. Ahh... so, my name is Nat Device. I'm thirty-five, and I've been climbing for twenty-two years. I started rock climbing professionally about fifteen years ago."

Aziraphale was surprised. "Oh, wow, so you must have been quite young when you began climbing, then?"

Nat grinned, "Yeah, I started climbing when I was thirteen, doing competitive sport climbs for my high school team. Indoor stuff, in a gym."

Aziraphale covered a few more basic questions: why she started climbing ("Because it was something to do in my shitty—err, it was something to do in my very small hometown—and looked cool, honestly,"); what she liked about it ("Conquering the challenges that very few other people can, testing myself against nature, solving weird rock problems") how she decided to go pro ("Money!" she had laughed). Then he circled back to the man of the hour.

“How long have you and Crowley been together?”

Nat looked up thoughtfully, counting out the time in her head. “Oh, Gods, let me think... fifteen... sixteen years? Yeah, sixteen years.”

“That’s quite a long time! Congratulations. Was it love at first sight?” Aziraphale imagined it must have been love at first sight, long before Crowley ever opened his mouth. Otherwise, someone as perfectly lovely as Anathema Device wouldn’t have stood for his nonsense for a minute, let alone sixteen years.

Nat gave him an odd look, however. Confusion, perhaps, before realization dawned across her face and she gasped, “Oh! Oh Gods, no. No, no, no, fuck no—ah, sorry, I mean—can’t swear in the interview, right?”

Aziraphale smiled gratefully. “Best not. But do go on?”

“Yeah! Yeah, sorry. No, we’re not—Crowley and I aren’t *together* together. We’ve been best friends for that long, but it’s not, never has been, romantic. Gods, can you imagine?” She choked a laugh of purest disbelief and glanced at Newt, who was outright giggling.

“He is cute though,” Newt said with a waggle of his eyebrows, which caused another peal of laughter in Nat.

Aziraphale felt the bright pink heat in his cheeks and ears. He always lamented how readily he blushed. “Oh! My mistake, I shouldn’t have assumed.”

“No, that’s alright. I guess I can see how—I mean, you’ve seen him. He’d have to beat people off with a stick if he ever actually socialized with other humans—but no, Crowley is not my type and I am definitely not his. Newt, over there, Newt is my partner! This is our house. Crowley lives with us, in our basement downstairs.”

So, Nat was decidedly not Crowley’s wife. That made a fair bit more sense now that Aziraphale bore the context of Crowley’s surly disposition.

Nat was a much easier interview, to be certain.

When Aziraphale returned home, he had pages of notes from their conversation. She was even gracious enough to spend a significant amount of time off-camera explaining climbing terms to him.

‘Grigri’ was right at the top of his list. ‘Braking device that pinches down when rope moves too quickly—a fall,’ he’d written. Answered that question handily. Nat even grabbed one from her gear storage and a bit of rope to show him how it worked. It was essentially a glorified cam.

She also explained lead climbing, where the climber clips the rope into existing anchors in the rock wall as they climb, as opposed to top rope climbing, like in a climbing gym, where the rope is already fixed at the top of the route. “Leading is what me and Crowley do when we’re climbing outside. That’s what he’ll be doing for the Big Climb,” Nat said.

“The Big Climb?” Aziraphale asked.

“Oh, yeah, that’s what we always call his current project climb. Whatever crazy idea he’s gotten into his head, the white whale, that’s the Big Climb.”

“So the project that we’re filming…”

“Yeah, that’s the Big Climb, exactly.”

Crowley’s current Big Climb was a multi-pitch route. Aziraphale inquired about that term, too. “That’s a really long climbing route, longer than just one rope, so the climber starts the route with their belayer handling the rope on the ground like usual, and climbs the first seventy, eighty, maybe a hundred feet or more—that’s the first pitch—until they don’t have any more rope length left to continue. Then the belayer follows them up, right along the same route that the lead climber just clipped in. Once the belayer reaches the same height as the lead climber, they start a new rope and carry on. Lather, rinse, repeat until you reach the top of the wall. Those kinds of climbs can take multiple days, though, if they’re very long or very challenging, so sometimes you’ll take a portaledge up and sleep on the wall overnight.”

That had thrown Aziraphale for a loop. “Y-you… you sleep up there?”

Nat grinned, looking a little feral. “Oh yeah.” She looked entirely too excited at the prospect.

Apparently, they would climb up with their backpacks, sleeping bags, and a collapsible ledge on a metal frame that clipped into the anchors on the rock wall. “Perfectly safe,” Nat had said, but the thought of sleeping at that kind of height frankly made Aziraphale queasy. He had no idea that sleeping at height was even an option, let alone something to speak about as if it were commonplace. Terrifying, absolutely terrifying.

Nat seemed to anticipate his fearful hesitation. She’d probably had to explain this to the laity often enough; Aziraphale certainly didn’t know anyone who’d ever slept on a flimsy ledge hundreds of feet in the air. “Oh, you stay clipped in while you’re up there, so even if you roll off, you won’t fall,” Nat explained, but corrected quickly, “I mean, you’ll fall a little and it’ll be a hell of a way to wake up, but you won’t die or anything.”

That didn’t really bring Aziraphale any comfort or endear him to the idea. Not at all. He’d never had any particular fear of heights before that moment, but he was swiftly reconsidering his stance on the matter.

Aziraphale was up late that night organizing his notes and preparing questions for Newt, just in case Crowley would be in a fighting mood the next day as well.

He was disappointed—perhaps more disappointed than was truly warranted—to find that Crowley was so prickly. So unwilling. So *annoying*, frankly.

That’s what you get for letting your cock do the thinking.

Crowley had been just as stupidly handsome in person as he’d looked in his photos. That flame red hair was an absurd beacon that must draw attention everywhere he went, even when swept back

into a messy bun like it had been in most of his climbing videos on YouTube. He'd even had a little braid trailing back over one ear sometimes. Aziraphale had, of course, gone through all the usual gay rites of passage like learning to braid his sisters' hair, and he had a shameful twinge of disappointment that he wouldn't ever get to put his hands on that magnificent red mane.

His thighs had looked unfairly strong in those stupidly tight climbing trousers. *Painted-on* was the phrase that came to mind. Aziraphale hadn't even known it was possible to be attracted to someone's calves, and yet here he was, cataloging the exact way Crowley's heel kicked out when he'd pivoted on stone. His whole body moved like a threat, and Aziraphale—poor idiot that he was—had felt every twitch of it like a promise, instead.

He briefly considered opening a new private tab.

No. No! He was a grown man. A professional. This was *work*.

He mentally closed the tab he hadn't yet opened.

He hesitated.

The arms, though. *Good Lord*, the arms. Crowley's arms were long and wiry and strong, peppered in little scars and freckles. They were the type of arms that looked like they could hold on for dear life, or claw at the sheets while someone held him down. Aziraphale could picture it all too easily: Crowley's wrists in his hands, long legs tense, mouth twitching like he didn't want to beg but might anyway. It would be terribly satisfying to pin Crowley down and make him behave.

Not that Aziraphale was thinking about that. Not at all. Certainly not *now*, while he was alone in his library with a half-glass of white wine going warm on the desk, his shirt unbuttoned at the throat, and the glow of his laptop casting cool judgment across the room.

Aziraphale wasn't even sure why he was still thinking about the ridiculous man that way, like he was *attracted* to him. The personality was off-putting enough. It was.

No, really.

But...

Aziraphale would be the first to admit that he hadn't always had the best taste in men, as evidenced by his long, long dry spell of singledom following a series of rocky relationships and messy breakups. He'd given up trying after the last one. It was safer that way. He now knew better than to think 'I can fix him with my love!' but that was a hard-won bit of wisdom, earned through years of heartbreak and a frankly astonishing number of sad-sounding jazz playlists.

So maybe he was just lonely. That was the more charitable explanation. And loneliness was never a good reason to seek a relationship. A casual one, maybe, but Aziraphale felt he was getting a little long in the tooth for one-night stands with the subjects of his interviews. Especially ones who clearly hated him. *Or maybe didn't?*

But then again—

Stop that. He might not even be single. He's probably not even gay!

But...

Aziraphale would likewise be the first to admit that Crowley was tragically, hopelessly, irritatingly his type. He'd always had a penchant for a dirty little smirk and a devil-may-care attitude, and Crowley had both in spades. That crooked grin and the wicked glint in his eyes (they were so light brown that they'd looked gold in the right light, *ugh!*) when he'd finally made Aziraphale snap were so infuriatingly attractive that he wasn't sure if he was more mad at Crowley for being a smug little shit or himself for imagining what a hatefuck would be like with him.

Aziraphale was weak for the type of man that would break his heart and not think twice about it, always had been, and he knew it. He used to think he had a type. Turned out he had a diagnosis. God, if Crowley had shown up wearing a leather jacket and stepped out mid-interview to smoke a cigarette, he'd make a fine triptych with Aziraphale's first and third long-term boyfriends. He even walked the same way, with long strides like he owned the fucking Earth and couldn't be bothered to make eye contact with it.

Maybe that was the real problem. It had been a long time since anyone had made him feel anything at all. Longer still since someone had *surprised* him. Aziraphale had started to believe he was past all that—past the flutter and thrill and embarrassing ache of it. He'd curated his life down to routines: morning walks, tea at nine, solitary lunches, and carefully cultivated aloofness at parties. He'd buried the craving for chaos under comfortable habits.

And then in walks Crowley, like a live wire in battered boots and sunglasses, rattling the whole damn cage.

Aziraphale took in a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, exhaled slowly, and then rested for a few more seconds. His therapist had taught him that. Box breathing. He still wasn't completely sure that it did anything at all, but at the very least he had a routine now for when his mind latched on to a thought and wouldn't let go. Crowley, apparently, was that thought, and Aziraphale's stupid, romantic brain (or maybe his cock, that was also a distinct possibility) was sinking claws into it deep.

Aziraphale briefly indulged the fantasy of confronting him tomorrow—something cool and poised, perhaps a little cutting. Something that would make Crowley blink, recalibrate. *See him*. And then what? He'd smirk again, probably. Say something awful. And Aziraphale would either rise to the bait or fall into bed with him. Maybe both. Maybe in that order.

God, he hated men like that. And God help him, he couldn't seem to stop loving them either.

Aziraphale considered opening that tab again, just for a moment. Just to look. Then hated himself for it and shut his laptop with a clatter instead.

He was already looking forward to seeing Crowley again tomorrow.

May God have mercy on his soul.

The next morning, Aziraphale woke once again with a bag of frozen vegetables melting a puddle in his lap beneath his computer. He really needed to replace that thing, but he always got overwhelmed looking at the options on Amazon and flipped the lid shut with a frustrated huff

before he could get anything into his cart. Besides, he felt a little guilty using his current laptop to search for its replacement. It felt disloyal, somehow, like he was cheating on an old friend. *Absurd.*

And yet there it was again, another soft plastic bag of frozen veg, leaking a mess on his bed. *How many nights this month alone had he fallen asleep like this?* The fabric of his sweatpants was starting to feel like judgment.

He dumped the mess of frozen veg into the trash can and hung his duvet over the banister of his staircase to dry. He'd risen early enough to get a little work done before heading to Nat and Newt's home for the second day of interviews, mostly because he'd been shocked to wakefulness by the distinctly squishy suspicion that he had piddled the bed. Instead, he figured it was a better use of the extra time to get a treat. He would stop at the little bakery about ten minutes out of his way and get something good for breakfast.

He'd had such a shit time yesterday that he'd spent hours last night worrying over what he might have said to rouse Crowley's anger. "Absolutely nothing" was the answer, he concluded. Aziraphale had been perfectly polite, but he always had a niggling bit of self-doubt that caused him to look to his actions for evidence of wrong-doing before daring to blame anyone else. Low self-confidence, his therapist had said, as if he didn't know that about himself already.

There had been a vicious cold snap a couple days prior, the first of that autumn, so he was bundled as if embarking on an Arctic expedition when he stepped out his front door that morning: a deliciously soft tartan cashmere and wool scarf wrapped high, up and around his chin, a big puffy coat that reached his knees, longjohns underneath his slacks, fur-lined gloves. Aziraphale was not about to be chilly if he didn't have to be. He had standards. His cold-weather sartorial choices certainly made the frosty drive to the bakery more pleasant, at least until the car engine warmed up.

The bakery he stopped at, Angell's Cakes, was by far Aziraphale's favorite in the city and well worth the detour. He would know. He'd tried almost all of them (and left Yelp! reviews). Aziraphale was nothing if not a gourmand for baked goods. Any food, really, but he had a special penchant for pastry. Besides, he was a frequent and known patron of this establishment, and he got a warm, fuzzy feeling from the friendly rapport he had with the lovely baker and her counter staff.

They greeted him by name and knew what he wanted before he even reached the counter: a blueberry danish because the fruit meant it was an appropriate breakfast food, a honey drizzle cake because he liked how it paired with a cup of tea, and a *pain au chocolat* because he could never say no to good chocolate. He tripled up this time in case any of his crew or interviewees also wanted a breakfast treat. Aziraphale was always happy to share his love of fine food with anyone who would permit him.

He'd already polished off a blueberry danish by the time he pulled into Nat and Newt's driveway. It certainly eased his nerves about whether Crowley would make another surly showing today, or if he'd finally be able to interview the actual subject of his documentary. Aziraphale wasn't above comfort eating when he needed it.

The thought of seeing Crowley again had kept him up half the night. Not out of fear, exactly. He wasn't afraid of the man, but *something* about him itched at Aziraphale's calm. It got under his skin. He'd imagined the worst: that Crowley wouldn't show, or that he *would* and make another spectacle of things. The bakery run wasn't solely an indulgence; it was a shield. Pastry armor.

Newt greeted him at the door, took his bankers' box from him, and yelled to the rest of the household, "Mister Fell is here! Nat! Crowley?"

Nat appeared first, just as Aziraphale had shaken off the cold and was hanging his coat on the rack. She greeted him and pulled a couple of chairs into place for the interview session.

“I brought some pastries, should any of you like one? Best bakery in the city!” he said with as bright a smile as he could muster.

“Oh, that’s really kind of you. Yeah, absolutely.” Nat plucked the box from his hands, and Newt followed her to the kitchen like a bloodhound on the trail.

“What kind did he get?” Newt asked while trying to lift the corner of the box before Nat could make it to the counter.

Aziraphale chuckled and began setting up his constellation of interview materials around a chair. He was still a little early. Maggie and Nina wouldn’t be around for another fifteen or twenty minutes. Plenty of time to gather his thoughts, drink his lovely cup of coffee from the bakery, and try to mentally prepare himself for whatever emotional state Crowley was in that day.

Speak of the devil...

“Ah. Aziraphale?”

Aziraphale turned around in his seat to acknowledge the address, mid-sip. It was Crowley, of course.

“Good morning, Crowley. A pleasure to see you again.” Aziraphale decided it was best to act as if yesterday hadn’t bothered him at all.

“Hnn. Yeah, mornin’. Look, uh...” Oh, Crowley was adorable when he played at docility. “I’m sorry if you felt like I was out of line yesterday.”

Aziraphale’s therapist appeared clear as day in his mind’s eye, as if summoned by the arcane rituals of the narcissist. ‘That’s a non-apology, Aziraphale,’ she’d say, sitting primly in that armchair with her expressive eyebrows. ‘You can’t apologize for how someone else feels.’ He could almost hear the click of her pen, the quiet sigh she always gave before asking if he was ready to set a boundary. *God, he hated that question.*

“Hm.” Aziraphale finished his sip of coffee and took a moment to school his features. “Did Nat force you to come apologize to me?”

Crowley’s face twisted into a scowl. God, but he was even pretty when he was angry. Aziraphale was so fucked.

“Well, you asked,” he growled and crossed his arms like a petulant child. Aziraphale half expected Crowley to stamp his feet. “She did, actually, but I was gonna give it an honest go.” Crowley shifted his weight and scowled again, at the floor. He scrubbed a hand through his hair like it was physically painful to be this sincere. “ Though I can see that’ll be a waste of my time.”

“It’s certainly a waste of my time for you to attempt to apologize for my feelings. However, if you would like to apologize for your behavior yesterday, I would be more than happy to—”

Crowley tossed his hands in the air and turned away. He yelled toward the kitchen, “Nat, fuck this, I can’t. I’m going to the gym.”

Nat's head popped in the doorway from the kitchen, mouth full of pastry. "Crowley, what on—"

"Nope, nope. Not doing this today. I'll catch ya later." Crowley waved a dismissive hand at her and walked out of the room in a truly magnificent huff.

Nat looked bewildered. "What happened?!"

Newt's head popped out next. He took a messy bite of pastry and grinned. "So I'm doing my interview today, huh?"

Aziraphale forced a smile, yanked up from somewhere near the molten core of his irritation. "Yes. Yes, you are. And what a treat for me."

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts?

Wild ass theories about how the documentary filming will go?

Sympathy for Aziraphale's gay yearning?

Verbal abuse for Crowley, our favorite resident Little Shit(TM)?

Praise for our homegirl Nat, who takes no shit from anyone?

Hand Hold

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale tries to reason with Gabriel. That is a disaster.

Nat makes Crowley call and apologize to Aziraphale. That is... less of a disaster.

Then Interview Attempt #3 begins.

Chapter Notes

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The morning after Crowley's disastrous second attempted interview and Newt's single, pleasantly successful interview, Aziraphale was in a bit of a snit. Newt's interview had gone well. He was well-spoken and forthcoming, if a little spacey from time to time, but Newt wasn't the man who would be quite literally taking his life into his own two hands to climb for the documentary. No, that man had once more conducted himself like a bratty child, and Aziraphale was sorely tired of wasting time on someone who so clearly and vehemently wanted nothing to do with him. He'd had enough of that for one lifetime already, thanks.

He was not, in fact, contractually obligated to relive his entire dating history just to get one climbing interview on film.

And so Aziraphale was ringing up Heaven's Gate's office first thing in the morning to... to what? Plead his case? Throw his toys and stomp off? Finally tell Gabriel where to shove it? Perhaps he should have thought through the conversation he was about to have with—

"This is Gabriel. How can I help you today, Aziraphale?"

Deep breath. Okay, going to wing it, then. Buck up, old boy, get on with it.

“Well, actually, I’m calling to discuss the documentary, err, obviously. It would seem that we’ve encountered some resistance from the interviewees. Well, one interviewee.” Aziraphale sincerely hoped that he didn’t sound as pathetic as he suspected, but his voice did that thin, tight thing it always did when he was trying too hard to sound unconcerned, like it had a preemptive apology baked in to every vowel.

“You’ve... encountered resistance?”

Aziraphale laughed nervously—a terrible habit—at Gabriel’s wholly unsympathetic, disbelieving tone. “Mister Crowley is a rather prickly fellow, you see. He’s refusing to be interviewed.

“Michael already scouted and secured these interviews. Everyone agreed to them. Aziraphale, what happened?”

What did you do to fuck this up? That’s precisely what Gabriel and his stern, filial ‘you know what you’ve done wrong and I’m very disappointed in you’ tone implied. Aziraphale knew it and, frankly, resented it.

“I-I... well, that’s the thing, nothing happened, we showed up for first round interviews and it appears that Mister Crowley got cold feet about the whole documentary, erm, thing. He’s been very disagreeable with me. Downright insulting, to be perfectly honest. Twice now he’s refused the interview! I don’t know that I can work with this man if this is how he is determined to comport himself for the remainder of the filming.”

A long silence festered between them. Aziraphale hated it when Gabriel used his own tactics against him. That was cheating.

“Gabriel, are you still there?” Aziraphale hazarded after a moment, hoping against hope that the call had dropped and he could simply pretend none of this had ever happened. Perhaps he could fake his own death, assume a name, start a new life in a new town with a small bookstore and absolutely no redheads. And never think about Gabriel or Heaven’s Gate or Crowley ever again.

He hears Gabriel sigh. No such luck, evidently. “Aziraphale—”

“No, now... no, I know what you’re going to say, and I’ve absolutely handled hostile interviewees before, but that was when they actually sat down for the interview in the first place!” Aziraphale could really ramble when he got on a roll.

“Aziraph—”

“And I know that he’s already agreed to be interviewed but for some reason, some reason that is entirely opaque to me, he has decided to throw a spectacular tantrum and renege. Frankly, I haven’t the foggiest clue why because—”

“Aziraphale!” Gabriel interjected, rather too forcefully than was truly warranted, Aziraphale thought with a huff.

“Yes?”

“First, let’s be perfectly clear: this guy is obligated to do the interview. Take a copy of the contract with you if you need to, Michael should have sent them to you. Print ‘em out and wave ‘em around. If he really wants to back out now, that’s between him and his attorney.”

“Well, I—”

“Not done yet, sunshine. Second, whatever personal issues you have, whatever little tiff has gone down between you and this guy? Those problems are your own. I’d suggest you govern yourself accordingly. Do the damn interview.”

“Gabriel, it isn’t—”

Gabriel barreled onward: “And last, but definitely not least, I need not remind you of your own contractual obligations to deliver the films that the production company requests, do I?”

Aziraphale pressed his fingertips to his temples. He wondered briefly if he could get away with telling Gabriel to go fuck himself after all these years they’d worked together. Well, ‘together’ was perhaps too strong a word. They worked ‘together’ in the same way that parasitic wasps worked ‘together’ with their unfortunate caterpillar hosts. Not a cheery affair based on camaraderie and mutual respect, to be certain. It was more of a long-running hostage situation with better lighting.

Instead, he drew a breath to purge the expletive that was champing at the bit to escape.

“Right. Of course, Gabriel. I will handle it,” Aziraphale said, eager to end the call without any further dressing down.

“See that you do.”

“Well, thank you for your time, regardless.”

“Of course! Anything for my favorite documentarian,” Gabriel lied, like a liar.

Aziraphale punched at the end call button with all the aggression of a man under contract to produce shitty documentaries for a predatory company and hung up without his usual formalities, not even a “have a good day, bye now!” He felt like quite the rebel in doing so.

He thought briefly about storming into Gabriel’s office, slapping down his eloquently worded resignation, and monologuing something Shakespearean. But he’d never stormed into anything in his life, and Gabriel didn’t deserve the satisfaction.

And later that day, between prep sessions for his interviews and thinking up terribly clever comebacks to Crowley’s insults entirely too late, he fantasized vividly about sending a high resolution scan of his ass to the Heaven’s Gate fax line with Attention to Gabriel F. Archer.

“Call and apologize to him.”

“Nat.”

“Crowley.”

Crowley and Nat stared at each other from across his bedroom.

So, this is a standoff, eh, Señora Device? A showdown at the OK Go-Fuck-Yourself Corral.

He was trying to channel the image of perfect carelessness, lying out diagonally across his bed with more limbs off than on. Complete relaxation. An aloof air of not-giving-a-fuck, the likes of which humankind had not yet seen. He resolutely, unequivocally, did not care at all about Aziraphale Fell's opinion of him.

It was just a coincidence that he hadn't stopped thinking about that tiny furrow between Aziraphale's brows for the past twenty hours. Or the way his mouth did that little twist when he was mad.

Goddamn, Nat had such a stone-cold poker face, though, looming there in the doorway to his bedroom like he was a teenager caught with cigarettes again. Like cheap cigarettes, too, not even the good ones.

After a long beat, Crowley lost the stare-down and sighed. "I'm not doing this documentary," he insisted, determined to stand firm against this incursion into his carefully curated private life.

Nat rolled her eyes at him. She did that a lot. "Are we seriously having this conversation again, you absolute man-child?"

Crowley gasped and laid a delicate, theatrical hand across his chest. "Why, I never!"

Nat was unmoved. "Crowley fucking call him and apologize. And do it tonight," she growled, actually growled at him. Crowley hadn't even known she could do that. It sent a shiver of fear through him.

"Nat—"

"I'm not arguing with you about this anymore. Aziraphale is a perfectly nice man, and you have been a complete dick to him for no reason other than your own ridiculous insecurities. Call him. Tonight." She swept out of the room, grumbling something that sounded a lot like "fucking swear to god, if I have to deal with this one more time, I'll—". He couldn't catch the rest, but he took her meaning.

Crowley stared up at the yellowing, popcorned ceiling and tried vainly to come up with excuses. He'd really hoped that the film crew would be so put off by him that they would void the contract and show him the door, but clearly that hadn't worked. For a moment, he even reconsidered his stance on intentionally injuring himself for the season.

Unfortunately, and though it absolutely pained Crowley to admit it, Nat was right. He'd been a man-child. He *did* need to do the documentary. Aziraphale was a nice man. He deserved a hell of a lot better than being snapped at by some neurotic dirtbag in black joggers.

And so fucking hot, too.

Okay, wow! Could do without that internal commentary, thanks.

Crowley *did* find him distressingly attractive, though. In an infuriating kind of way. There was something about that nuclear fucking smile and those big, sparkly blue eyes and that ridiculous doll nose that was driving Crowley absolutely spare. It made Crowley want to be an asshole to

Aziraphale even more, as if he should be punished because Crowley couldn't control how his dick felt about Aziraphale's thighs.

Fuck, those thighs. Crowley had exactly zero business thinking about them. He was not allowed to think about him. They looked like they could crush him like a watermelon and Crowley would die happy.

Oh my god, imagine sitting in that thick fucking lap and calling him 'daddy,' though.

"No!" He warned himself sternly and sat up in bed. No, there was no need at all to entertain that line of thinking.

For one, he was probably married to a nice man named... Dan...or something. Dan definitely wore cute cable knit cardigans and took Aziraphale out on lovely dates to the season's latest opera, and they had two schnauzers with adorable literary names at their adorable cottage home. And even if not, Aziraphale was so clearly not the type of man that you fucked and didn't call back. He was a *boyfriend*. Aziraphale was the type of guy you *courted*.

He probably wrote thank-you notes in a fountain pen with perfect handwriting. He probably cried softly at weddings. He probably had a favorite cookie jar, and it had a theme that matched the rest of his kitchen.

In contrast, Crowley had been single almost literally his entire life. He'd had a few torrid summer flings with other climbers while traveling and more casual hookups than could be safe or reasonable, but he'd never bothered with relationships. He just didn't have the time to maintain a relationship with a non-climber, and he'd never met another climber that he'd want to date seriously.

Maybe if Nat had been a man, or if Newt had been gay...?

Crowley blinked a few times to clear both notions from his mind manually.

Aziraphale was, despite being a complete pain in the ass, absolutely fascinating. He was kind to a fault unless you crossed him. Then he had a steel spine. He was soft in all the best places (Crowley wanted to bite that little roll that appeared under his chin when he looked down, *why is that even sexy?*), but Crowley had seen him pick up that bankers' box full of his notes with one arm. Crowley had tried to lift it himself when no one was looking, and, despite being a seasoned professional rock climber of more than twenty years, his shoulder sagged.

That kind of strength made Crowley want to climb Aziraphale like a boulder problem. Just jam his fingers in all the handholds. Match grip on his thighs, heel hook on his hip, press up against his chest, mantle onto the face. It would be gymnastic.

Truthfully, Crowley felt rather bad about being an asshole to Aziraphale. God, the way he'd smiled when they first met. But Crowley had been an anxious mess, and worse yet, terribly petty when he was being purposefully avoidant. It had helped him get out of so many things before. And then, of course, as he riled Aziraphale up it had become fun. Aziraphale was incredibly hot when he became righteously indignant, like some sort of terrible, beautiful avenging angel, come to smite the sinners.

Crowley's mind rather unhelpfully explored what it might be like to be Aziraphale's bratty sub. Piss him off intentionally, get him riled up, goad him into bending Crowley over his knee and

turning his ass fire engine red with those fucking hands. Did he mention those *hands* ?

God, they were thick. Veined. Fucking unfair. The type of hands that said, 'I bake pies and deliver spankings to bratty subs in equal measure.'

Crowley groaned and flopped back into his bed. This was not gonna work. Nat was right, he needed to do this documentary, and he also needed to not be mooning over the director. How fucking unprofessional could you be? First to pick a fight and then to, what, hump the man's leg?

His phone chimed. He grabbed it to check the message. Nat, of course, in the house group chat.

< Nat, Newt, Crowley 

Today • 12:23 PM

Nat

call him

i'm so serious crowley

Newt

just call him bro



Crowley tapped back a quick, annoyed response.

< Nat, Newt, Crowley 

Today • 12:24 PM

Crowley

yes mommy

Nat

gross

you're gross



Crowley cracked his first smile in what felt like days of sulking. Another text chimed.

< Nat, Newt, Crowley 

Today•12:25 PM

Newt

she's right, you know

Crowley

does she ever make you call her mommy or

Newt

she doesn't have to ~make~ me do that



Crowley regretted saying anything in the first place.

< Nat, Newt, Crowley 

Today•12:26 PM

Crowley

i dont have his number naaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat

Nat

sec and i'll send it to you, you helpless child



Much to Crowley's chagrin, Nat did, in fact, text him Aziraphale's phone number. When it appeared on his screen, however, he got butterflies.

Like I'm in middle school calling my crush, Jesus, get a grip.

He angrily tapped the number on the dialpad.

It rang once. Twice.

“Aziraphale speaking.”

The butterflies started to riot. *Oh no, his voice is sexy on the phone. Oh no oh no oh no.*

“Aaaaahngk. Yuh. Yeah. Hi.”

“Hello?”

“Yeah! Yeah, Aziraphale, hi. Hey, it’s uh, it’s Crowley. From the documentary.”

What a stupid thing to say. How many Crowleys can he know?

“Oh, hello, Crowley.”

Did Aziraphale sound disappointed? Fuck. Crowley, who had never minded being a disappointment to everyone around him, was suddenly deeply unsure that he could handle being a disappointment to this man.

“Yeah, hey uh. Look, I’ll cut right to the chase and not waste, uh, waste any of your time.”

“Alright.”

Terse Aziraphale was a little terrifying. Crowley nervously licked his lips and carded his hand through his hair.

“Right. Yeah. Okay, so I’m realizing that I’ve been, uh... pretty unfair to you the past couple of days. And you don’t deserve that. You didn’t do anything aside from having the bad luck of dealing with me. So anyway, I’m sorry. For being an ass. And for... ahh, stuffing up your interview. And for the shitty apology the first time. You were right, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Nat did put me up to that one. Well, full disclosure... she put me up to this one, too, but I also actually mean it this time, so that’s... better?”

It sounded like Aziraphale released a breath he’d been holding.

“Well... thank you, Crowley, for saying that. I-I really appreciate it.”

“Mmmn, yeah. Well. I was an ass.”

Aziraphale paused. The silence was deafening.

Crowley smiled and continued, “Yeaah, go on. You can say it. I know you want to.”

Aziraphale huffed a little laugh. *Oh, he had a nice laugh.*

“Yes, you were an ass.”

“Yeah, thought so. Anyway, I’d like to try again. Tomorrow, you know, the interview thing. I’ll be good, I promise.”

Wow, ‘I’ll be good?’ Really? Gonna be a very good boy for him, Crowley? Crowley rolled his eyes at himself.

“Alright, Crowley. Well, thank you again, for the apology. And—I’m also sorry for losing my temper that first time. That was completely—”

“Naaaahhhh, you don’ hafta do that. I goaded you. I was tryin’ to rile you up. Only right to take the bait.”

“Yes, well, nevertheless, it was unprofessional of me, and it won’t happen again.”

“Alright, fair enough.”

“Thank you, Crowley. Have a good night, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, catch you then, ‘Ziraphale.”

“Goodnight, Crowley.”

“Night.”

Crowley hung up and flopped back onto the bed again. Aziraphale had accepted his apology. Aziraphale had a *really* nice laugh. Crowley definitely, absolutely, one-hundred percent did not have a crush on this man, and the bubbly feeling in his chest was completely unrelated to the phone call.

And other lies we tell ourselves.

He stared at the ceiling again and tried very hard not to imagine what Aziraphale looked like when he laughed in bed, with his shirt all rumpled and his hair messy and his face pillow-creased and radiant.

Fuck.

He could make this work!

The next morning, Crowley made it up to the living room early. He’d been to the climbing gym again, hoping to exorcise (*Hah, exercise, am I right? Badumtss.*) his demons and hopefully avoid a repeat of Interview Attempts One and Two.

Nat eyed him warily as he draped himself across the couch. “You good today?”

Crowley grunted.

“Crowley.”

“Yeah, I’m good today.”

“You called him?”

“I called him.”

“And you *actually* apologized? None of that shit you do when you don’t really regret what you’ve done?”

“Yes, Nat, I *actually* called him and I *actually* apologized and now if you could quit riding my ass about it, I would very much like to enjoy a few moments of blessed peace before I scrape my soul out like pumpkin guts and let some total strangers film it.”

“She only gets to ride my ass, thanks,” Newt interjected as he dropped off a cup of coffee in front of Nat.

“I only want to ride your ass, babe.” She smiled up at her beau, sickeningly sweet.

“Please get a room, there are children present,” Crowley gruffed and threw an arm over his eyes.

“Finally, he admits that he is a child!”

Crowley flipped them both off with the lazy grace of a man who couldn’t be bothered to sit upright. “If I start acting like a functioning adult now, you’ll raise your expectations. Not falling for that trap.”

A knock at the door interrupted their totally unjustified and very hate-crime-esque harassment of Crowley.

“Got it,” Newt said, and made to welcome their guests once again.

“Good morning, everyone!” Aziraphale greeted them in that obnoxiously kind way that he always seemed to.

“Good morning, Aziraphale,” Nat said moving to help him with his cargo.

Crowley sat up from his couch flop and looked toward their guest trepidatiously. He hoped that the apology call last night would be a hard reset on their rather tumultuous acquaintanceship to date.

Aziraphale caught his eye and smiled. “And good morning to you, Crowley.”

“Mornin’.”

Aziraphale had coffee and pastries with him again. What kind of maniac always brings pastries to share with others?

And not just any pastries. *Good* ones. His danishes had layers. Crowley’s entire section of the fridge and freezer currently contained a jar of dill pickles, three Gatorades, and a single tragic leftover burrito, wrapped in a paper towel and slowly mummifying.

Maggie and Nina arrived shortly thereafter, filming gear in tow, and busied themselves with setting up. Nina was gruff as usual, Maggie a ray of fucking sunshine sent down from Heaven.

Crowley gave them both a nod, careful not to make eye contact too long in case they’d already seen through him. They probably had. He was deeply transparent, sometimes. Like horny cling wrap.

Aziraphale settled into his chair and assembled his notes as they worked. He really was cute as fuck in his light colored button-down and waistcoat.

Who wears a waistcoat in this day and age? Who wears a bow tie?

Crowley was aghast at himself for thirsting after a man who unironically wore a bow tie, and had done so for three days in a row now. A different one each day, which meant he owned and wore at least three different bow ties. Crowley wasn't even sure he had a single pair of pants that weren't either black jeans, black joggers, or some form of spandex.

He probably owns a watch with a chain. Like, not ironically. He probably polishes it. Probably has a special little cloth.

Aziraphale absently grabbed his coffee cup from the side table next to him and lifted it to his stupid fucking cherub's bow perfect lips.

"I thought we were a little old to have our moms write our names on our cups, Angel."

Aziraphale furrowed his brow, then looked down at the coffee in his hand. 'Angell's' it said across the cup sleeve.

"Oh, the bakery is named Angell's—you—you're teasing me."

Crowley chuckled, "Got it in one, Angel."

"Oh good Lord, is this going to be A Thing now?"

"Sure is, Angel. Sure is."

Aziraphale flushed pink, just at the edges. Crowley didn't even mean to do it, he just liked the way the name landed and the way Aziraphale squirmed like he wasn't used to being flirted with before ten in the morning. Or at all.

Unbeknownst to either Aziraphale or Crowley, Nat and Newt shared a long, weighty glance across the room. The type of glance between partners that can convey an entire conversation as if by telepathy. Newt smothered his grin in his hand. Nat did not, because she was shameless.

"So, ah... well, let's get to the interview, if you're ready, Crowley?"

"Yeah, let's knock this out."

"So, same as before, if you could start us off with a little introduction of yourself."

"Right. Yeah, so my name is Anthony Crowley, err, just Crowley. God, don't call me fuckin' Anthony. That shit drives me up a goddamn wall. Uh, and I'm a professional climber..."

"Aww, Mister Fell, I brought you a coffee, too!" Maggie said with a dawn bright smile and a paper to-go cup in her gloved hand, outstretched proudly toward the rolled-down window of Aziraphale's car door.

Aziraphale laughed fondly as they exchanged coffee gifts from the drink carrier in his passenger seat. “Oh! Well, I guess we’ll just be extra caffeinated today, won’t we?”

Maggie returned the chuckle. “Mm. Might need it, anyway. It’s a long one.”

It was barely dawn, frosty cold and sleep hazy as Aziraphale, Maggie, and Nina arrived on location for their first shoot of Crowley and Nat climbing outdoors. Nat had texted the week prior to give directions to a ranger station just inside the bounds of Miller’s Falls Pocket Wilderness. Truthfully, Aziraphale hadn’t even known what a “pocket wilderness” was until he Googled it the night before, despite considering himself a worldly gent. The phrase conjured images of enchanted glades and forest sprites. What he got was crumbling asphalt and a row of porta-johns.

He’d never been the outdoorsy type, vastly preferring time in the library or curled up in his armchair at home to being sweaty and mingling with nature.

Miller’s Falls was two hours’ drive outside the city, most of which had been bland, uneventful interstate travel. Aziraphale and his shoot team were very accustomed to long road trips in search of good film, but what a harrowing trial the last quarter of the trip to Miller’s Falls had been. Aziraphale was certain that one of the yawning chasms that passed for potholes on the shitty little gravel road that connected the pocket wilderness to the local highway had eaten one of his sedan’s wheels. Maggie and Nina had the foresight to trek in with Maggie’s Jeep, which seemed to fare far better, and Aziraphale was bitter about it.

His poor suspension had made a final, wheezing squeal not unlike a death rattle as they crossed the cattle guard.

“Okay drive in, Mister Fell?” Nina asked as she unloaded their gear bags from the back of the Jeep. Aziraphale could hear the smug smirk in her tone and gave her an exasperated look that made Maggie giggle.

“You know, it was absolutely lovely,” he said in a falsely chipper tone. “Beautiful scenery here. There is no chance that my car can drive back out of here, but I’m hardly even upset about living here now.”

Maggie tittered again and Aziraphale shot her a reproachful look, which didn’t deter her a bit. She laughed louder as she crunched away across the parking lot to the rustic little Rangers’ station.

Aziraphale spent precious minutes huddled in his car, trying to soak the warmth from the air vents into his bones before his film subjects arrived and forced him to confront the wintry reality of the day’s filming order. He took a moment to look over the notes he’d compiled the night before; summaries of the interviews to date.

“What made you want to be a climber?”

“I like... ah. I like the physical challenge, obviously,” Crowley gestured wildly when he spoke, as if he was casting a spell to manifest the words, “There’s something to be said for making my body endure that kinda toll, you know? From the ground below all the way to the top of the cliff or the mountain or whatever. But s’really only part of it.”

“Oh?”

“Mmn, yeah. I guess s’like ah... I like goin’ to places that nobody else can get to. I like to be the one guy that can do that. I can say ‘I’ve been to the mountaintop, and I return a changed man,’ which I guess sounds silly, an’ it prolly is, but there’s something special up there. At the top of a climb, I mean. You can see things that nobody else gets to see, really beautiful things, and you can feel well and truly alone up there, and know that you chose it. S’different from bein’ alone in your everyday life due to circumstance, bein’ lonely. Being alone up there is a choice. It’s self-reliant. Only my two hands and my body to count on, you know? I’m the only one that can get me up the cliff, and I’m the only one that can get me back down, and there’s only one path to take, an’ it’s a tough one that not everyone can do.”

Aziraphale had seen a wistfulness flit across Crowley’s face. Dare he call it romantic? Crowley *was* a terrible romantic in Aziraphale’s estimation. It was sweet, really. He suspected, however, that if he ever said as much to the man, Crowley would punch him right in the windpipe.

But Aziraphale took his victories where he could, so when Crowley had opened up that little bit, he did not smile or preen. He had merely noted, quietly, inwardly, and delightedly, that Crowley was making an effort.

And that he’d called him Angel. Twice.

And Aziraphale, poor soppy fool that he was, had liked it. He had immediately written it down in his notes. Not underlined, of course. That would be unprofessional.

The gravel crunch of tires heralded the climbers, and Aziraphale perked up to catch an eager glimpse of the man. He told himself that he was merely curious to see if Crowley actually showed up for filming. The van parked across the lot and, after a moment, out popped three well-bundled figures. Well, two regularly-bundled figures and one Michelin Man cosplay.

Aziraphale begrudgingly turned off his car, grabbed his coffee, braced himself against the vicious cold, and stepped out to meet his subjects.

“Good morning!” He yelled across the shabby lot with a little wave, and the climbers turned to greet him.

“Good morning to you!” Newt responded first, chipper as ever with a silly bob of his head, and gave a cheer with his thermos.

“Morning!” Nat seconded as she unloaded some backpacks from the back seats of the van. “Those directions I sent okay? Find the place well enough?” She heaps the packs against the van tire.

“Oh, yes. Thank you! Just fine. Lovely drive in, too. A bit cold for this old man’s taste, but I’ll manage!” Aziraphale rocked on his heels for want of anything else to do, feeling a bit more useless in that moment than he’d like.

Crowley, man-turned-marshmallow, shuffled out from the far side of the van with his hands stuffed under his arms.

Aziraphale snorted before he could think better of it.

“What? Don’t look at me like that,” Crowley grouched and jammed his mittened hands further into his armpits.

Aziraphale tried to smother a smirk, to little effect.

“I get cold!” came the muffled protest from behind Crowley’s chunky knit burgundy scarf, wound up his neck and face near to his eyeballs.

“He’s a whiny bitch about the cold, always has been. I can’t tell you how many nights Newt and I have spent with this popsicle shivering between us in our tent because he can’t keep himself warm,” Nat said.

“Oh my god, his toes against your shins are like ice cubes! They sear into the flesh, they radiate cold without even touching you,” Newt added as he opened up the back doors of their van.

Crowley gave Newt an unimpressed stare. “Okay, so, to clarify, cold doesn’t *radiate*, and furthermore—”

“You been playing footsie with my man?” Nat shot a jealous look at Crowley and dropped a hefty backpack at his feet.

“He wishes.” Crowley’s eyes narrowed and glared at Nat over the fluffy edge of his scarf. “I get cold,” he muttered again.

“Mmhm. Did you bring your Hot Hands?” Nat asked, and Aziraphale heard the implied ‘you forget them enough, so it wouldn’t surprise me,’ that she left unsaid.

“They are quite literally the only way I am not actively losing digits at this very moment.” Crowley was absolutely never a drama queen. He adjusted his scarf again with theatrical indignation. Only his eyes were visible now, glaring through frost-bitten injustice. Aziraphale had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop from laughing.

Maggie approached from behind, crunch-crunching the whole way, and appeared beside Aziraphale with a pair of neon yellow brochures in hand. “Mister Fell?” She offered one up.

MILLER’S FALLS POCKET WILDERNESS, A WILD AND SCENIC AREA, the pamphlet declared in that humorless, no-nonsense way that only government documents can.

“I checked in with the Ranger, she said we were good to set out any time, just need to put these tags under the windshields of our cars before we go,” Maggie said as she rummaged through her puffer coat pockets to produce a trio of numbered tags. “Should be a good day for footage of Mister Crowley climbing. The weather is supposed to be nice!”

Crowley groaned as if the thought that he’d be filmed climbing only just occurred to him.

Aziraphale didn’t say anything. He just sipped his coffee and tried not to visibly enjoy the sight of Crowley in mittens, scarf, and full pout.

The trek into the woods was far nicer than Crowley had hoped, and that made him irrationally grumpy. How very dare the sun have the audacity, the gall, to shine on his piss poor mood?

The hike from the parking lot to the rock wall was usually a wet mile of boot-sucking muck and shitty scrambles over fallen logs that were simultaneously too high off the ground to step over and too low to crawl under—always a fun time to straddle a nice thick log with friends on the trail—followed by a mile of shit-slick rock steppes that turned your knees to quivering jelly as you descended toward the Falls.

No such luck, today, of-fucking-course. Couldn't be a prettier day, and isn't that just a pisser?

No, the hike was downright pleasant. Infuriatingly pleasant, replete with soft morning breezes rustling through the fallen leaves and little woodland critters that Aziraphale and Maggie cooed about and occasionally stopped to take pictures. Crowley wasn't sure why he so desperately wanted everyone to have a bad time today, and he wasn't about to put that feeling under the mental microscope to prod and examine it, either.

It was possible that he was projecting. It was also possible that he needed to be left alone with a juice box and some noise-canceling headphones.

And so, two comfortably dry and mentally restorative miles of leisurely ambling later, the party arrived at the practice wall.

The practice wall probably had a formal name that Crowley had known once, but he couldn't recall it for the life of him. More importantly, it had six challenging routes up its faces, each of which conveniently mimicked portions of the Big Climb he would attempt at some as-yet unspecified future date, and all of which he hoped to tackle before the day was done.

The group shucked off their gear and set up a day camp as their home base.

Maggie and Nina started filming before he could even change into his climbing shoes.

“Are you seriously filming my manky socks?” Crowley was hunched down like a forest goblin, fiddling with his gear and making unflattering faces that he seriously doubted would be good television.

Neither woman responded like the consummate professionals they were. No one wanted to hear from the camera person in a documentary, he supposed.

Aziraphale, however...

“We have to capture as much as possible. Little establishing shots like this can be cut in later, if we need them.”

“So what I'm hearing is that you need to establish that I change from shoes into other shoes.” Crowley's foot slipped into the climbing shoe with a *floop*.

“Mm. Yes, watching you velcro your shoes will be riveting for the viewers,” Aziraphale shot back sourly.

Crowley actually laughed at that.

“Well, be my guest, then.” He stood and made a grand, wide-armed gesture and cheesed a grin. It probably came off more aggressively than he'd intended, but there wasn't much to be done for that.

“If you two are done sniping, please?” Nat interjected and motioned to her hip harness for Crowley to check. It was a safety habit they had kept up as long as they’d known each other: check your own gear, double-check your partner’s gear. He made a quick circle around her, tapping at each of the buckles as he inspected.

“Looks good.”

“Doesn’t she, though?” Newt added with a cheeky brow waggle from over near the backpacks that he was unpacking, and Crowley left the question as rhetorical.

“Check me too?” Crowley presented his harness to Nat, and she repeated the inspection for him.

“All good. Which one do you want to run up first?” She asked as she flaked out their climbing rope from the rope bag.

“Mmn,” Crowley stood with his hands on his hips and his toes bent into talons in his climbing shoes and stared up at the rock face pensively. “I think maybe let’s start on *Stephen* and see where that takes us.”

“Stephen?” Aziraphale inquired curiously.

“Ah, yeah. So these routes get named by whoever finishes them first, usually. The six on this wall are *Stephen Almost Died Here*,” Crowley motioned up the wall directly ahead, “then to the right you’ve got *Lounge Lizard*, then *Craptacular*, *Look Ma No Hands*, *Imminent Falls*, and on the end *Arachnophobia*^[5].”

“Charming.”

Nat turned her attention on from the rope to address Nina’s camera directly. “They call it *Arachnophobia* because our buddy that topped it out first jammed his whole arm into a nest of baby spiders on the way up and kept going with passengers!”

Crowley snickered at Aziraphale’s horrified expression.

“Not too outdoorsy, are ya?” he chided and clapped Aziraphale on the shoulder as he walked past to gather his quickdraws from his bag and clip them to his harness.

“Certainly not *that* outdoorsy, but despite what my flaming homosexual presentation may lead you to believe, I have been known to go for a hike now and again,” Aziraphale huffed.

Crowley’s eyebrows attempted to unionize with his hairline.

Well, that definitively answers one question, at least.

“Right. Err. Nat? Rope? I gotta climb *Stephen* like a tree.”

Nat handed off his end of the rope, checked his knot after he tied in, and set up her grigri for belaying. Nothing left but to climb the damn thing.

The first two attempts at *Stephen* went, in no uncertain terms, poorly. Crowley’s hands were cold and achy against the frigid rock face. His left knee kept shaking like Elvis revived from the dead. His harness tugged at his crotch uncomfortably. He was pretty sure he was missing simple, obvious moves that would make the climb easier. It wasn’t like this was his first time on these routes, not by

a long shot. He was getting frustrated too easily and the wrong headspace was always his undoing when he tried to climb.

Crowley was halfway up his third attempt at the route, one that he felt he should not be struggling with nearly so much, when he finally snapped. With a growl to himself and a petty scuff-kick of his shoe against the rock— *that'll show it!* —he yelled down to Nat: “Take!”

Nat took up the rope slack with the seasoned efficiency of a contract killer garroting a mark. Crowley leaned back into his harness, away from the wall, and let her take his weight. His fingertips were so fucking cold that he couldn't feel what he was grabbing anymore. They were already looking more roughed up from the stone than they should so early in the day.

“You okay?” she shouted up. Not very far, mind, because Crowley hadn't even gotten that far up the route on the third try.

He crossed his arms and tucked his hands as he sullenly contemplated the climb for a moment. Finally, he rolled his eyes at his apparent incompetence, then shouted back: “Bring me down!”

Nat slowly lowered him to the ground. It irritated him, the care with which she brought him back to the forest floor. He'd have preferred to be dropped in that moment. Crowley hated the pitying look she gave him when he finally planted his feet.

“What's the deal?” Nat asked.

“Dunno.”

“You want to try again in a minute? I can send Newt up.”

Newt looked far too eager. *Fine.*

“Mmmnyeah. Go ahead,” Crowley relented and unclipped his harness from the rope, then stepped aside for Newt to take his place giddily.

Crowley drifted toward the tree line, arms limp at his sides, then shook them out with a hiss through his teeth. He yanked at the chalk bag on his harness—not because he was about to climb again, but because it gave his hands something to do. The fine powder clung to his sweat-slick fingers as he rubbed it in with unconscious precision. His hands moved without thought. It was a ritual. A hard reset.

The sun cut through the canopy above, gilding everything it touched. Crowley felt the heat of it on his back and across his shoulders. He didn't think much of it, just kept working the chalk into his palms like it might scrape the frustration out of him.



From somewhere behind him, he caught the sound of a breath hitching. It was quiet, just a pause. He turned slightly, enough to glance to the side, and caught a flicker of Aziraphale's face: clipboard up, eyes down, cheeks red.

Crowley blinked.

Was he...?

No, couldn't be.

He turned away again and rubbed his hands together a little harder, like he could erase the heat crawling up his own neck.

The thing to understand about Crowley was that, once he got frustrated, his social graces packed up their bags and went home. He tried very hard to count to ten and not make his lack of impulse control everyone else's problem, but no one ever accused Anthony J. Crowley of too much emotional intelligence.

So when he turned away from the wall to take his break and regroup, *plonked* down on a convenient tree root and tugged at the velcro straps on his shoes to free his already aching toes, and found himself the sole focus of Maggie, Nina, Aziraphale, and cameras, he really should be forgiven for his response.

"Oh, fucking—really?!" He scraped a trembling, numb hand through his sweaty hair. "Is this what you need to be filming right now?"

He did feel bad for being a rude little shit, really. But he couldn't help himself. It was one thing for Newt to take video of his climbs, but Newt didn't shove the all-seeing eye of Documentarian Sauron in his face when he needed a break, a single moment of privacy to regather his scattered wits back into one basket.

"Stop fucking filming me for a moment, will you? Jesus, have some decency," he growled toward Maggie and Nina and their obnoxious lenses, though neither woman flinched nor made any move to stop rolling film.

Aziraphale, though... he was almost comically easy to goad.

"Absolutely not," he stepped between Crowley and the cameras, alight with a spectacular righteous fury that made Crowley's hip harness uncomfortable in a way that he was not prepared to examine just that moment.

"You will not speak to either of my crew that way again. Do you understand me?"

Crowley felt like a naughty schoolboy being dressed down by his teacher in front of the class, awash with red-faced, stomach-turning humiliation at being called on his shitty behavior. It made him want to find a stick and poke the bear more, and wasn't that an interesting revelation?

"If you have a problem with the way things are being done, you bring it to me," Aziraphale continued, stern-faced and gorgeous, with such calm steel in his voice that Crowley was probably more terrified (or desperately aroused?) than if Aziraphale had been shouting.

Crowley's mouth went dry. His palms were still dusted with chalk, but he wanted to wipe them on his pants, anyway.

More news on this developing situation at the bottom of the hour.

“Yup, got it!” Crowley *unequivocally* did not squeak, because he was a grown man and did not squeak.

Aziraphale stared him down with sea storm eyes for another long beat before saying: “Very good.”

And oh, that plunged a hot iron tip right into Crowley’s solar plexus and yanked downward, eviscerating as it cauterized the wound’s ragged edges open.

Learning all sorts of things about our self today, aren’t we?

[crowley_interview_session3_finalfinalFINAL.mp4]

“How long have you been climbing?” Aziraphale had asked.

Crowley answered immediately this time, which was a welcome change from the first attempt at the question, during the first attempt at his interview.

“Ah... I started when I was in school. Not like—not climbing for the school team or anything, just after school, for something to do. Better ’n drugs and all that. I musta been... eleven or twelve? Hit me right in the formative years.”

“Is that young for a climber?” It sounded young, but Aziraphale wasn’t sure.

“Eh, for some maybe, but there are definitely kids out there that start younger, ones with parents that climb or whatever. I didn’t have that. I just started going because it sounded cool, I guess? And I stayed because the guys at the climbing gym kinda saw me out there struggling, humiliating myself, honestly—just a little boy filled with rage and taking it out on my gangly body,” Crowley snorted a little laugh at his young self, “and they took me in. Showed me how it was done. Corrected me when I fucked it up and were proud of me when I got it right.”

He shrugged a little. “I don’t have—I didn’t have that growing up much, so it made a difference, you know? Just some guidance from some guys I respected, who were cool and could do the things I wanted to do. I was in awe of ‘em, scrambling up those walls like gravity didn’t mean a thing. I wanted to be just like ‘em.”

Aziraphale’s voice, off-camera, was gentle. Curious. “Are you?”

Crowley blinked. “Am I...?”

“Like them. Now. Did you grow up to be just like them?”

Crowley... blushed? Was that a blush?

“Oh, hah! Nah. No, no. I mean I never—I’m not nearly that cool.”

But Aziraphale didn’t believe him. Not entirely. Not with the way Crowley looked when he climbed.

And as the camera lingered on Crowley fidgeting with a carabiner in his lap, Aziraphale wondered what question he had inadvertently asked... that Crowley had almost answered.

[5] The real Lounge Lizard: <https://www.mountainproject.com/route/106099182/lounge-lizard>

The real Arachnophobia: <https://www.mountainproject.com/route/106967509/arachnophobia>^{[[return to text](#)]}

Chapter End Notes

Progress! Kind of.

At least they got the interview done now, right?! Right. Third time is the charm.

Also, Aziraphale once again shows Crowley that he will not tolerate shitty behavior. And once again Crowley is horny about it.

On Belay

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale contemplates loneliness.

Nat, Newt, and Crowley begin planning their trip for the Big Climb.

The gang returns to Miller's Falls for more climbing footage.

Crowley gets Aziraphale's number (again, for real this time).

Chapter Notes

 This is a periodic friendly reminder that this fic will be going into DADDY KINK TERRITORY. It is in the tags, it is in the note on the first chapter, and I am warning you again here. No one has brought up any issue with it so far, but I want to be COMPLETELY CLEAR so no one gets too invested without realizing what they are in for! If it bothers you, no harm, no foul, I can respect that. I want to make sure everyone is fully informed! With that being said, this fic will NOT contain any age regression, ageplay, or incest kink. It's mostly just a very sweet, soft dom caretaker and his bratty boy kind of dynamic.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

A few days after the first filmed climbing session, Aziraphale found himself once again wrangling a bag of frozen peas underneath his struggling laptop while it tried its level best to load the raw footage from Maggie's camera. It sounded like one fan was primed to launch directly through the plastic housing and perhaps put a hole in the drywall. At least this time, he had the company of an early winter sunset out the window of his tidy kitchen dinette.

Well, tidy in theory.

The placemat had a ring of dried tea across it from his second cup of the evening. The fruit bowl was stacked with unopened mail and one half-eaten protein bar he'd meant to finish on Tuesday. A taper candle sat beside the laptop, melted to one side in a wide dish, the wax having formed its own topography. It would have been lovely ambiance if he'd remembered to light it.

He'd spent many evenings of his life in the same rut: footage to cull, plans to make, notes to take. Maybe some calls to potential interviewees? Though he was loath to interrupt anyone's family dinner time, that was just rude. Just because he was working through the evening didn't mean everyone else was equally alone with a microwaved TV dinner and a laptop slowly baking itself into a crisp.

The sentiment caused him an odd pang of angst rather suddenly, an implacable lump right at the bottom of his throat. Living alone certainly had its benefits. No one dropping dirty laundry outside the basket or drinking milk directly from the carton like a savage. His spare time was his own, and for that, he was genuinely grateful. It was a luxury many could not afford. And yet...

And yet he wouldn't have minded a second warm body for company. Even just to sit in the same room and simply exist together in quiet contentment. The thought hit him sideways—an image of another person across the table, someone content to simply exist in tandem. No conversation, just presence, elbows bumping occasionally. A shared silence. A breath that wasn't his own, filling the same space. The subtle gravity of someone else's evening sigh. He swallowed the lump and nudged the peas into a more stable configuration under the machine.

Maybe he should get a cat?

The video finished loading before he could decide between Mister Darcy and Dorian Grey as potential cat names. (Though Dorian felt especially appropriate for someone with a persistent fondness for velvet waistcoats and morally dubious men.) Aziraphale scrubbed through the first few minutes of footage: a bit of parking lot footage, trees, trees, some scenic shots of the rock walls, more trees, and, *oh, there!*

He finally saw Crowley in miniature, unmistakable with that fervid streak of red hair and the abysmal posture, sitting on the bare earth and methodically donning the climbing gear fanned out on the surrounding ground. It was the moments before he'd complained about Maggie filming his manky socks.

Aziraphale clicked "Play" and let the footage roll. Crowley hadn't realized yet that he was being filmed. It was actually a lovely shot—Maggie always had a wonderful eye for filming candid subjects. He was in profile, seated on the ground amidst fallen russet leaves with one knee casually bent and the other stretched out, fiddling with something between his fingers. The thick tree trunk at his back, with its lowest branches above and roots below, framed him. He smiled to himself, clearly amused by whatever he had in hand.

Aziraphale was momentarily struck by how relaxed Crowley could be when he was off his guard. He looked perfectly at home, sitting on the dirt, humoring himself by spinning a carabiner around his finger. The wind stirred his ponytail. He looked up slightly, half-lidded, the sun in his eyes, and utterly unbothered. It was only when he gained an awareness of observation that he tensed up, shut down, and became, for lack of a better term, an asshole.

But the private moments before? The moments where he's just himself without pretense? Unselfconscious and unwatched and unarmored? Well, Aziraphale was none-too-pleased to admit once again that Crowley really was absurdly handsome, all dramatic, expressive eyebrows and that hawkish nose and strong chin.

In a different world...

One where Aziraphale wasn't contractually obligated to mine the man's life for content. One where Crowley looked at him like that—unguarded—for real.

He scrubbed the footage forward again just to banish the thought.

The next clip auto-queued without his input. Aziraphale sighed, resigned, and glanced at the file name. “_crowley_bts_03.mxf.” He clicked it.

First, a slow sweep over more trees. Then Crowley again, this time pacing at the base of the wall with his harness on, mumbling to himself and occasionally glancing up at the route. He muttered something—in audible over the wind—but grinned afterward, like he'd made himself laugh. The camera zoomed in steadily, holding on the moment he raked a hand through his hair and tied it back again with an elastic that he plucked from between his teeth.

Aziraphale froze the video. The image hung there for a long time.

He scrolled through the folder. There were more. So many more. “_crowley_bts_04.mxf.” “_crowley_b-roll_raw01.mxf.” “_crowley_candid_2.mxf.”

Dozens of them, those little slices of time when Maggie, either by design or instinct, had trained her lens on Crowley in the in-between moments. Moments where he wasn't climbing or performing, he was just existing. Stretching. Sighing. Laughing at something Newt said off screen. Shaking out his arms and humming under his breath.

Aziraphale selected one at random and let it play. Crowley was sitting cross-legged on a tree stump, bathed in golden light, idly brushing chalk from his palms. Then—god help him—he licked the side of his thumb and wiped a streak off his pants.

Aziraphale slammed the laptop lid shut.

The fan, mercifully, died a quiet death beneath it.

He reached for his tea, found it cold, and drank it anyway.

Meanwhile, on the far side of town Crowley, Nat, and Newt sat scattered around their living room, quietly working out plans for the rest of winter.

Newt was six sheets deep in Excel, tracking budgets with the intensity of someone preparing for a tax audit. He hunched over the coffee table with his face perilously close to the screen, squinting, and occasionally making small, distressed sounds that suggested either certain bankruptcy on the horizon or a spreadsheet formula gone rogue. Every so often, he'd mutter, “What the fuck is this cell even doing?” like his spreadsheet was acting with intentional malice.

Nat, cross-legged on the floor, was surrounded by climbing gear in varying states of disrepair. She was sorting through it with ruthless efficiency, occasionally muttering “nope” or “absolutely not” under her breath, like she was swiping left on a dating app for carabiners. The reject pile beside her had grown into a small, metallic hill. Crowley half expected it to clink and collapse like a junkyard tower. He briefly considered drawing eyes on the topmost cam and giving it a teensy crown. King of Shit Gear. Ruler of the Land of Fuck-No.

Crowley himself sprawled sideways on the couch, long legs draped over the armrest, scribbling a tentative schedule in their planning agenda—the one Newt had bought, all color-coded tabs and laminated pockets, and that Nat had physically put in his hands and refused to let him ignore.

“I think I can be ready to start on the Big Climb in March or so,” he finally announced, chewing absently on the end of his pen.

Nat hummed an agreement without looking up. “Sounds good. Don’t want to start too early though or the cold will kill us.” She tossed a fraying quickdraw into the reject pile with casual finality.

“Late March, then,” Crowley suggested.

“*Very* late. We’re not freezing our asses off again just because you got excited about a dry forecast.”

Crowley lifted his hands in mock surrender. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“You say that every year.”

He grinned. “It’s part of my charm.”

Newt, from the other end of the couch, made a noise that might have been polite skepticism or indigestion. Crowley chose not to ask.

Nat looked up, snapping the gate of a carabiner a few times before deeming it acceptable and adding it to the keep pile. “Are we going back out next week?”

“Yeah, I want to give *Stephen* another shot as soon as we can.” He paused, then added with feeling, “It’s personal now.”

“It’s a plan,” Nat agreed, and made a note on her phone with her elbow because both hands were full of quickdraws.

Crowley glanced back at the schedule and tapped the pen against the paper. “You’ll let the filming folks know?”

She looked up at Crowley and smiled widely in that obnoxious way that Nat reserved for gleefully denying him something. “Nope, sure won’t!”

“Nat,” Crowley whined and slumped his shoulders as pathetically as he could manage. He tilted his head against the cushions and gave her what he believed to be his best ‘sad Victorian orphan’ face. Possibly consumptive, definitely tragic. He thought he was rather good at looking pitiful when he really put his mind to it.

Alas.

“Nuh uh. I’m offloading more of this onto you. You’re a big boy.” Another carabiner clinked into the reject heap.

“M’really not.”

“You’re a medium boy,” she countered without looking up.

Crowley considered it, then shrugged. “I’ll take that.”

“Good. So text Aziraphale and let him know.”

He hated it when he couldn't distract Nat from giving him responsibility. He gave a long-suffering sigh, but he didn't argue. Mostly because he was secretly a little too willing.

"Fine," Crowley acquiesced, then pulled out his phone and typed a quick message, careful not to reread it before hitting send.

Just a logistics thing. Which was totally normal. There was nothing weird about texting a man just because you liked the way he pronounced "belay" or stood too close when he was explaining his camera setup or smiled like he didn't know how fucking devastating he looked doing it.

He waited. He didn't get a reply.

Which—fine. Aziraphale was probably busy editing film and eating fancy things and being fussy and perfect in some house full of antique furniture and lace doilies and that probably smelled like paper and bergamot and—

Crowley flopped back on the couch and stared at the ceiling. He tried not to picture Aziraphale in cute little glasses. Failed. Tried not to imagine what he'd look like editing in a sweater with the sleeves pushed up. Failed harder.

He was fine. Everything was fine.

He tossed the tabbed planner onto the floor with a little too much flourish and steeped his hands over his face like a man enduring an opera of suffering. Maybe he'd died on the wall last week and this was just hell. Spreadsheet hell, gear triage hell, texting-Aziraphale-and-not-getting-a-reply hell.

From the floor, Nat—without even glancing up—lobbed a tangle of webbing directly at his head.

"Ow! What the fuck!"

"You're being weird," she said.

"M'being perfectly normal."

"That's worse."

Crowley huffed and let the webbing sit on his face in protest. It smelled faintly of gym chalk and stale sweat, which was objectively gross and also deeply comforting, like being punched in the olfactory sense memories by nostalgia.

From the coffee table, Newt murmured, "This is gonna be our whole winter, isn't it?"

"Yup," Nat said, popping a haul loop with a loud *snap*.

Crowley just lay there, stewing quietly under the webbing, pretending he didn't care at all. Not one bit.

Not even a little.

His phone buzzed once. Not a text notification—just some promotional garbage about a climbing shoe restock. Aziraphale would reply, He'd see it, eventually. No rush. No expectations. Crowley was cool. He was chill. He was deeply, violently chill.

He adjusted the webbing across his face like a mourning veil and exhaled through his nose.

On the day before their second trip to the practice wall at Miller's Falls, Nat asked Crowley whether he'd heard back from Aziraphale or his film crew yet. Crowley, ever responsible and definitely not an avoidant-dismissive mess of a man, bolted out the door, feigning an emergency milk situation which required his immediate presence at the bodega down the street.

"We're out of two percent," he said, grabbing his keys. "The situation is dire."

"You don't drink milk," Nat muttered to his back.

"Exactly! Nobody's safe!"

And then he was gone. Nat was pretty sure his reply didn't even make sense, which only confirmed her suspicions.

Nat stared at the door for a long moment after it slammed shut. Somewhere, something in the house rattled from the force of his exit. She could feel the nonsense molecules diffusing through the air in his wake.

She sighed, swore to herself that this was the *very last time* that she would handle Crowley's mess (it wasn't), and dialed up Aziraphale herself to ask if he'd gotten Crowley's text.

Aziraphale answered on the third ring.

"What text?" He sounded genuinely mystified.

"A text message. From Crowley. Like last week sometime?" Nat supplied helpfully. Hopefully, even.

There was a pause on the line. Nat could hear the distant shuffle of movement—maybe Aziraphale pulling his phone away to check.

After a few seconds, he said, "No, I don't think I've got anything."

Nat huffed loudly. "Gods above, I'm gonna kill that man one of these days—okay, well, we're planning to go out tomorrow if you all want to film. I know it's short notice at this point, but..."

Another pause. This one had the energy of a man pinching the bridge of his nose or internally adjusting a calendar.

"Ah, yes. A little short notice but I'll... I'll see what I can do," he said at last.

"Okay, that's fine. Same place as before," Nat said.

"Same place as before. Same time?"

"Yep."

“Okay, I will let Maggie and Nina know. Thank you, Nat.”

“Yeah, of course. Sorry for the trouble.”

She meant it, kind of, but mostly in that ‘sorry that Crowley is the way he is, I can’t take him anywhere’ sort of way.

Aziraphale’s voice was calm and professional—no edge to it. Nat could tell he was the sort who didn’t get flustered easily, even when someone (Crowley) dropped the ball completely.

“No problem. I will keep you updated on what we decide, one way or another. Have a good day, my dear.”

“You too, bye!” Nat hung up and stared at the phone for a second before exhaling a noise that was somewhere between a groan and an emphatic ‘*fuck*.’ She *thunked* her forehead lightly against the kitchen wall and muttered, “Why am I the only adult in this fucking house?”

She puttered around upstairs for a while, reorganizing some gear bags and pre-packing tomorrow’s snacks for her and Newt. She didn’t pack any for Crowley. He was a grown man, he could do that himself. Also, he’d made a scene and then vanished like a regretful father saying he’s going out to the store to buy smokes.

A half-hour passed before she realized Crowley still hadn’t come back with his... very urgent milk. She checked the fridge. No milk in sight, of course. Suspicious, she descended into the depths.

Sure enough, she found him in his room in the basement. He was watching something on his phone—low volume, bright colors, something fast-paced and deeply uneducational. Nat caught a glimpse of the screen and realized it was one of those hour-long compilations of raccoons committing light crimes, set to royalty-free drum and bass. Crowley was sprawled across the bed diagonally like he’d melted there, one sock half-off, snickering every time a trash bandit got away with the goods.

There was a half-eaten bag of marshmallows on the floor next to him, torn open like a wild animal had gotten to it. A protein bar on his pillow, still sealed but squished flat. A roll of athletic tape unspooled across the blanket like he’d tried to use it as a makeshift tape measure and given up halfway through.

She paused in the doorway, watching him laugh helplessly as one raccoon stole a cupcake with its cute little thief hands and fell off a picnic table.

Crowley looked like someone had poured a man into the room and forgotten to shape him.

“You’re not well,” she informed him.

“Justice for the little guy,” he murmured back, not looking up.

“Crowley!” she snapped.

“Mnnnh?” He didn’t even flinch, just lazily swiped his touchscreen, then thumbed the screen brighter.

“Where did you put the milk?”

“The milk?” He repeated it like the word had never been introduced into his life before this exact moment.

Nat crossed her arms and stared him down, not unlike a disappointed parent. She wanted to yell. Or laugh. Or both. “Yeah. Wait, you’re seriously pretending you don’t—never mind. Just... the milk that you heroically sprinted out of our kitchen to go buy?”

He glanced sideways at her. He had such a shit poker face when he was lying. “Oh, they ran out.”

“The store... *ran out*... of *milk*.”

“Damndest thing,” he said, as if that was a perfectly reasonable explanation.

Nat chose not to dignify that with a response. “I told you to text Aziraphale about climbing tomorrow.”

His head shot up at that, never one for being falsely accused. “Yeah? I did!”

“Did you?” Nat asked, disbelieving. “Because I just got off the phone with him, and he didn’t know a thing about it.”

Crowley suddenly looked much less certain. “I—I thought I did?” He said sheepishly, with an apologetic grimace.

“Dude.”

“What?!”

Nat didn’t dignify that with a response, either, and instead simply shook her head and walked back upstairs.

Crowley yelled after her, “Love you, Nat!”

“I tolerate you!”

“Love you *more* ! Hey, pack some climbing gear in case the others wanna try?”

“No!”

Nat did, in fact, pack climbing gear in case the others wanted to try. She had to guess a bit at sizing for the harnesses and shoes, but the three of them had collectively amassed so much spare gear over the years that she had enough to bring options for everyone.

“Oh, good Lord, I couldn’t possibly,” Aziraphale declined with a polite but wary smile, eyeballing the harnesses with suspicion, like they might bite.

“Ahh, come on, it’ll be fun!” Crowley pressed, rifling through the heap of gear to pull out a neon yellow hip harness and hold it up to Aziraphale for size. “Should do.”

“I really don’t think I can go up those routes that you were on. Not all of us have a casual relationship with gravity,” Aziraphale protested, waving Crowley off.

“Nah, I wouldn’t make ya try those. We’ll go to the other wall, it’s got easier routes. Beginner stuff. Give it a try. If you hate it, I’ll never ask again, swear on my life.” Crowley literally crossed his heart, which Aziraphale found deeply annoying and annoyingly adorable.

“Crowley, the other wall is like a mile in the other—” Newt started to say, but Crowley interjected.

“It’s not a big deal. Hardly take any time at all. Besides, if you’re gonna make a documentary about this, you should probably get a feel for it, huh? It’s like... method acting!”

“Method acting,” Aziraphale deadpanned.

“Yeah, but for documentar—method... method directing!” Crowley seemed so pleased with himself that Aziraphale couldn’t help but laugh. Crowley was impossible, and entirely too endearing.

“I... suppose I can try it?” Aziraphale relented tentatively, but he was none too thrilled at the prospect of hauling himself up any cliffs. The idea seemed laughable, even. Sure, he’d watched Crowley and Nat and Newt do it last trip, but they were professionals. Aziraphale was a middle-aged filmmaker whose last brush with exercise was an ill-advised attempt to get into running to impress a former boyfriend.

“Good!” Crowley was all too chipper, and it made Aziraphale’s stomach churn with nerves. What had he just agreed to?

The hike to the climbing wall was in the opposite direction from last time, but a mile shorter than the previous trip. The forest path curved ahead in long switchbacks, the early October sun filtering through the canopy in soft gold stripes. Somewhere up ahead, Nat and Newt were chatting and laughing, their voices faint.

Crowley slowed a little until he was walking side by side with Aziraphale.

“You okay?” Crowley asked, glancing over.

“Yes, thank you,” Aziraphale said, catching his breath. “This is just... a bit more exercise than I’m used to.”

Crowley smirked. “You’re doing fine.”

“I’m sweating in places I didn’t know had glands.”

“Well, you wear a waistcoat hiking, so that’s kind of on you.”

“I have standards,” Aziraphale sniffed.

“Sure you do,” Crowley said. “Completely impractical ones.”

They walked in companionable silence for a few paces. The dirt path crunched underfoot, and the occasional bird call echoed somewhere above.

Then Aziraphale asked, “What does it feel like? When you’re climbing?”

Crowley blinked. “What, physically?”

“Yes and no. I mean the... the whole experience. The feeling of it.”

Crowley looked thoughtful. “Depends on the climb, I guess. But... when it’s good? It’s like a... a hum? Or—I don’t know, maybe that sounds fucking stupid. A hum in your whole body. Like everything else just goes quiet. Endorphins and adrenaline are wild like that. I mean, it still hurts like hell, but I just don’t care anymore.”

Aziraphale tilted his head, intrigued.

“I stop thinking about my bullshit. Like my email or how stupid my body looks while I’m making the move up on the wall, or who I’m disappointing. All that just shuts the fuck up for once,” Crowley said. “An’ it’s just me up there, depending on myself to make the next move.”

Aziraphale hummed. “Sounds like meditation.”

Crowley shrugged. “Kinda. With more swearing and finger tape.”

“Still,” Aziraphale said quietly. “It sounds... peaceful. In its way.”

Crowley grinned sideways at him. “What, you tempted to trade your film for a harness?”

“Not even a little.”

“Coward.”

Aziraphale gave him a look. “You’ve seen me try to walk across gravel in leather shoes. I wouldn’t survive vertical terrain long term.”

They kept walking, the path narrowing ahead into dappled shadow. All too soon (seriously, way sooner than he’d wished), Aziraphale found himself standing at the bottom of an imposing rock face that did not look climbable by mountain goats, never mind humans. Where was he supposed to put his hands?

Crowley approached with a harness draped over his arm, looking entirely too smug about the whole thing.

“This one should fit,” he said. “It’s the most heinous color we have.”

Aziraphale eyed the confusing mess of straps as Crowley held it low for him to step into. “Are you certain this isn’t backwards? Or upside down?”

Crowley snorted, “It’s not IKEA furniture, Angel. Come here.”

Reluctantly, Aziraphale stepped forward into the harness. Crowley helped him pull it up around his hips and secure the webbing in the buckles.

“You’re lucky m’good at this,” Crowley muttered. “Lots of idiots manage to get this wrong, then you get strangled in the crotch. Very un-fun.”

Aziraphale looked down at him, trying very hard not to focus on the angle of Crowley’s jaw, or the way his long-fingered hands moved with such confident ease.

Crowley tugged the waist belt snug and gave it a testing tug. “Not a bad fit. It’ll do. You’ve got a good center of gravity for climbing, too.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a compliment,” Aziraphale said, watching Crowley fidget with strap ends.

“It is. Don’t make it weird.”

Crowley straightened up to his full height, looked Aziraphale up and down, and smirked. “Well, well. Don’t you clean up nice.”

Aziraphale sent up a brief prayer that he might survive this experience. “It’s a borrowed harness, Crowley.”

“Yeah, and you’re pulling it off. I mean, I’d offer to help you into the shoes, too, but that might be a little too intimate.”

“You are an impossible man.”

“M’charming as fuck and you’re scared of your own feelings,” Crowley replied breezily.

From across the clearing, Nat yelled, “PG-13, for fuck’s sake, you two!”

Crowley didn’t even look over. “This *is* PG-13, Nat. If I were gonna flirt properly, it’d be an R rating minimum.”

Aziraphale actually did look skyward that time. “Dear Lord, preserve me.”

“You’re doing great,” Crowley said and gently patted Aziraphale’s shoulder before walking a quick circle around him to check his harness, tapping at the buckles as he went. He made a little grunt of approval and tapped the harness at the hip.

“Pockets empty? Don’t want anything to fall out while you climb.”

Aziraphale took out his phone and handed it off to Nina.

“Watch too, the rock’ll destroy it,” Crowley added, to which Aziraphale unclipped the band and slipped it off his wrist, then handed that off to Nina as well.

Satisfied that Aziraphale was divested of all his personal effects, Crowley then dropped to his knees, right there in the dirt at Aziraphale’s feet.

Aziraphale flushed red hot at the sight of a painfully gorgeous man kneeling before him. He hadn’t been able to look at Crowley this close before. The shape of his mouth was really something else; it was obscene. *What did he look like when he pouted?*

“W-What are you...?”

Crowley looked up at him with wide amber eyes and a coy expression like... like... well, the implication seemed obvious. Apparently Crowley thought so, too, because the handsome bastard winked at him and then, ever so slowly...

...he held up the untied end of the climbing rope.

A startled laugh clawed out of Aziraphale's chest. "Oh! Yes, right. Please."

Crowley's mouth twitched into a smirk as he grabbed the front loop of Aziraphale's harness and began tying in the rope. The front loop that was directly at Aziraphale's crotch. His face heated further, if that were possible.



“So,” Crowley said as he made a complicated knot in the rope with his long, elegant fingers. Oh, Aziraphale really did not need to start thinking things like that.

“This route should be pretty doable. The handholds here are big, and there are plenty of ledges to take a rest on as you go. Remember to climb with your legs, not your arms. You’ve got more power in your thighs, you’ll just wear your arms out.” Crowley’s gaze dipped to Aziraphale’s thighs and lingered. *Did he just lick his lips?*

“There’s an anchor at the top of this route that we can walk to, so I sent Nat up the trail to thread the rope through there and drop the ends back down. I’m tying you into one end right now, and I’ll be belaying you while you climb, so I’ll be tied in to the other end. If you need to take a break and rest on the rope while you’re climbing, just yell ‘take’ and I’ll pull up the slack.”

Crowley finished the knot and stood, brushing the dirt off his knees. “I won’t let you fall too far.”

A man of his word, Crowley didn’t let him fall, but that didn’t preclude Aziraphale’s constant state of low-grade panic the entire way up. Climbing was easier than he thought it would be, at least from a physical perspective. The mental aspects, however...

“Take! Take, take, take! I feel very certain that I am about to slip and fall!” He shouted down to Crowley as his forearms began to tremble.

“Fall, then!” Crowley yelled back with the surety of a man who had been climbing his entire adult life and was not under the jurisdiction of the laws of gravity.

Aziraphale rolled his eyes. *Just fall. Sure. Easy. Yes.*

“That’s not—ah—that’s not the point!” A vision of his body as a paste on the ground below shot through his mind quite unhelpfully.

He heard Crowley’s cackling laugh float up. Infuriating man.

“Are you sure you’ve got me?!” Aziraphale shouted down once more, his mild but building panic desperate for reassurance.

“Yep! I’ve got you!”

Aziraphale nodded to himself, gulped a deep breath, and leaned back away from the wall. He was certain there was no way the knots and anchors would hold him, and as he let the rope take his weight, it stretched an alarming amount.

“Okay, now just let go!” Crowley shouted again.

“Let go?!” What a ridiculous suggestion.

“Yep!”

Aziraphale took another shuddering breath, steeled his nerves, screwed his eyes shut and...

He let go. The gritty rock handholds slipped free of his aching fingers and he swung back, away from the wall. His stomach swooped in sheer mortal terror.

But he didn’t fall.

“There you go! Now have a rest. Let me know when you’re ready to go again,” Crowley added when Aziraphale made the foolish mistake of glancing down at him. *Wow, this was entirely too*

high in the air.

Meanwhile, on the ground below, Crowley adjusted the grigri and the free end of the rope to wait out Aziraphale's rest more comfortably. He made an effort—he really, truly did make an effort—to not stare at Aziraphale's ass the entire time, but Crowley was a weak man and, given that the belayer has to keep their eyes on their climber the entire time for safety, there really weren't any other places for Crowley to look.

And dear God in Heaven, did Aziraphale have a magnificent ass. And thighs. Crowley could die a happy man suffocated to death between them, and he'd thank Aziraphale for the opportunity with his dying breath. He'd had to put genuine effort into restraining his hands from reaching out to “steady himself” and copping a feel of one of those soft-but-muscled legs when he had been tying Aziraphale's harness into the rope earlier.

And now that Aziraphale was dangling from that harness a couple of stories up, Crowley had an excellent view. He imagined there was enough subtle strength in that body to give Crowley's twink ass a proper manhandling, and wasn't that a thought? Aziraphale using all that strength against him, pressing him face down, drooling into the mattress, while he pounded away at Crowley's—

“O-okay! I think I'm ready to try again!” Aziraphale said, startling Crowley from his incredibly inappropriate daydreaming. He filed that fantasy away for later review.

“Alright! I got you! Get going!”

Aziraphale swung himself toward the rock and reached out to reposition his hands and feet. Crowley felt the weight come off the rope when Aziraphale started moving again.

“There you go! You got it!”

Aziraphale progressed slowly. Move a hand up, move a foot up, move a hand up, move a foot up. His technique wasn't terrible, considering he'd never done this before. Crowley bit back a grin. The man was sweating through his waistcoat and muttering to himself like he was drafting a particularly scathing review of rock climbing as a concept.

From below, Crowley could see the tremble starting in his arms again. Any second now...

“There you go, Angel, you got it! Top out!”

“I—what?!” Aziraphale glanced up as his hand slapped over the top edge of the rock face. There was loose dirt and grass between his fingers. What?!

“Haul yourself up! You did it!” Nat's silhouette appeared above, laughing and cheering him on. The others added their own whoops and shouts. Crowley didn't cheer—he was too busy trying not to beam like a damn fool.

He watched as Aziraphale hauled himself up and over the top with one final grunt of effort, then flopped out of sight, flat on his back.

Crowley adjusted the rope with a grin he couldn't quite help. He couldn't see Aziraphale anymore, but he could imagine him lying there, panting, probably red in the face and halfway to swearing off physical activity for life.

“Good job,” he heard Nat say faintly.

Crowley didn’t say anything out loud, but privately? He was pleased as fucking punch.

Nat walked the shaky-legged and slightly delirious Aziraphale back down to the bottom of the wall, where Maggie offered him a cold bottle of water that he promptly downed.

“Oh my God, that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” he finally said as his heart rate came down from *heart attack imminent* to *wow this is uncomfortable*. “I feel like I’ve just done battle with the mountain and lost.”

“You didn’t lose. Ya got to the top, didn’t you?” Crowley asked as he came to crouch beside Aziraphale and offer him another bottle of water.

Aziraphale peeked at him with one eye. “I’m not actually certain that my arms are attached to my body anymore. It’s all very up in the air right now.”

Crowley grinned. “They’re still there. Mostly. Just wait ‘til tomorrow, that’s when the real suffering starts. Good luck squeezing a tube of toothpaste or turning a round doorknob with that shitwrecked grip strength.”

“Or using a car door handle!” Newt added.

Aziraphale sighed. “Oh good. Something to look forward to.”

Crowley chuckled. “Well, for the record—what ya did up there? Was pretty impressive. You got to the top.”

“Eventually.”

“Eventually counts,” Crowley said. “Eventually gets you there.”

Aziraphale looked at him for a long moment, but didn’t reply. The compliment lodged somewhere in his chest, warm and lingering.

“You looked great, Mr. Fell!” Maggie said and gave him a thumbs up while pointing at her camera.

Aziraphale groaned woefully as he tore into a four-dollar energy bar, “Oh no, you didn’t tape that mess, did you?”

“Sure did,” Nina grinned and handed his phone and wristwatch back to him.

“Wait, gimme your phone,” Crowley interjected, holding his hand out expectantly after unclipping the grigri from his own harness and tossing it aside.

“Why?” Aziraphale asked and took another bite of his overpriced energy bar. It didn’t taste like it should cost four dollars, but he was so hungry he didn’t care.

“Just... I’m gonna give you my number so we don’t have to keep going through Nat. She deals with enough of my shit without having to be the secretary, too.” He wiggled his fingers. “So? Give.”

“Oh, thank the gods above,” Nat said gratefully from somewhere behind him, and Crowley pulled a face at her.

He had a point, but...

“Didn’t you call me once? I should already have—”

“Yeah, and you immediately saved me as a contact after I called to apologize for being an unbearable asshole, did ya?” Crowley said with a kind of knowing arrogance.

“I... did not,” Aziraphale admitted reluctantly. He didn’t care to be perceived like this.

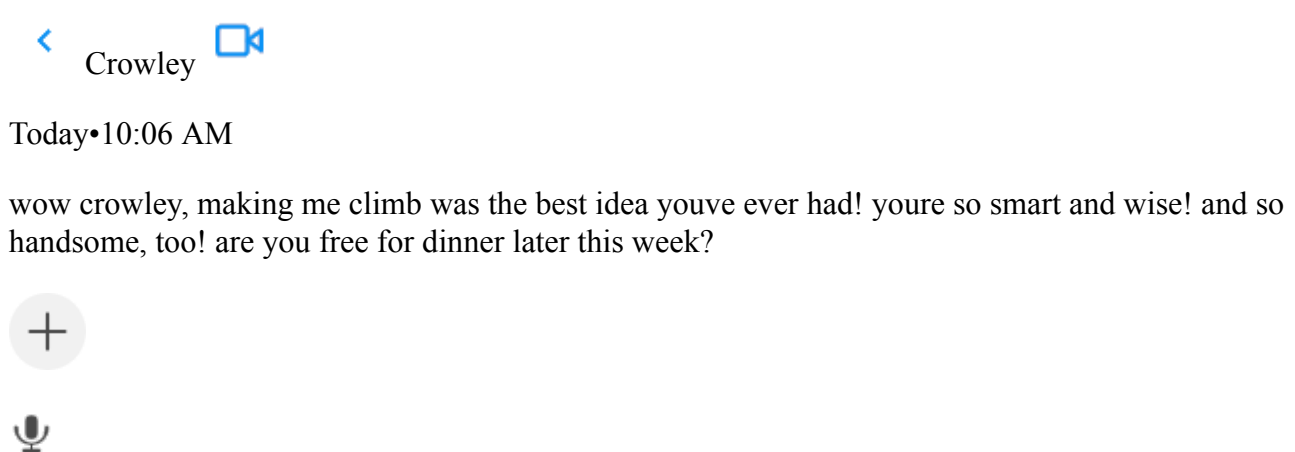
“Right, so... give.” Crowley wiggled his fingers again.

Aziraphale retrieved his phone again, unlocked it, and handed it over. Crowley furiously typed in *something*—it definitely looked like more characters than just a phone number, which was a bit concerning—and then handed it back.

“There ya go. Save Nat the trouble. I’ll text you stuff for filming, and you can keep me in the loop on... on whatever it is you need from me. Just shoot me a message. M’always around.”

“Right, will do. Thank you, Crowley.”

Aziraphale looked down at his messages app to see the text message Crowley sent himself.



Aziraphale chuckled and looked up just in time to catch Crowley smiling as he walked away.

“Alright, let’s get packed up and head over to the real deal, folks! We’ve gotta haul ass or I won’t have enough time today to do the climbs,” Crowley said as he started repacking their gear.

It was then that Aziraphale realized that Crowley had willingly given up a massive chunk of his practice time just so Aziraphale could climb a beginner route. It was probably the endorphins from the physical exertion, but Aziraphale felt strangely giddy in a way he hadn’t in a long time. As usual, he chose not to inspect that feeling too closely. He had a job to do, and they still had to hike three miles to the other rock wall.

Maggie and Nina intercepted him back in the parking lot while the climbers regrouped and changed out their gear bags for the climb they had actually planned for the day.

“Going to get some good stuff today, Mister Fell!” Maggie said, brushing a bug off her camera bag.

“Mm,” Aziraphale said, distracted. He’d been replaying a moment where Crowley had reached past him to grab his chalk bag—close enough for Aziraphale to smell sun-warmed skin and some faint, citrusy shampoo.

“Yes. Good light today. Should look impressive on film.”

“Crowley behaving?” Nina asked, which was really her way of asking if he was being a bastard.

Aziraphale cleared his throat. “He was quite focused, actually. No snide remarks today. He was very good at explaining how to climb, too.”

Maggie caught Nina’s eye. “Aww, he likes you.”

Aziraphale nearly tripped over Nina’s camera bag. “Excuse me?”

“You’ve got that glowy thing,” Maggie said cheerfully, slinging her gear over her shoulder. “Same one you had when we filmed that Antarctic expedition guy in Patagonia.”

“Robert St. John was eighty-three and married to the sea,” Aziraphale said stiffly.

“Still,” Nina added, “you only ever look that soft when you’re filming someone you like.”

“I am perfectly objective,” Aziraphale said, and then promptly dropped his water bottle trying to close the cooler.

“Sure, Mister Fell,” said Maggie, already walking away. “Totally objective. That’s why you’ve been watching his footage on a loop for a week.”

“I was checking the frame rates!”

“Mmhm.”

Aziraphale sighed, plucked his bottle off the ground, and made a mental note to delete at least one Crowley folder before they got too nosy.

Nat called out to ask if they were ready to hike to the climbing walls, and the group set off once more.

Later that evening, Aziraphale lay in bed with his laptop balanced precariously on a pillow beside him. After he’d returned home, he had pre-gamed his inevitable aches and pains with a heroic dose of ibuprofen and settled in on his bed to continue reviewing the footage to date. His muscles still hummed with exertion, and if he was honest, so did his thoughts.

He had climbed, actually climbed, and he hadn't hated it. Well, that's not true; he had absolutely hated it while he was on the wall, but once he'd gotten to the top, the exhilaration of finishing made the pain worth it. He thought maybe Crowley was on to something with that.

His fingers still stung and his back ached something fierce, but the soreness felt earned. He'd stepped outside himself, done something completely uncharacteristic, and the pride in that was strange and giddy.

But more than that... he kept thinking about the way Crowley had smiled up at him from below. The way his voice was steady and sure had cut through Aziraphale's panic. The way he had said 'I've got you,' like maybe it could mean something more.

And Aziraphale—hopeful idiot that he was—had taken that moment and emotionally eloped with it. In that moment, with the sun beating down on him and the fear sharp in his chest, he had looked down and found safety in Crowley's ridiculous, grinning face.

He clicked absently through the day's footage, mostly out of duty, though he told himself the same lie he'd told Maggie and Nina earlier: this was purely professional.

The moment Crowley had glanced over his shoulder on the trail—a half smile, sunlit hair, the glint of something unguarded in his eyes—played back in slow motion. Aziraphale lingered on it a beat too long. He could still hear Maggie's voice in his head: 'he likes you.'

He hit the space bar and rewound to watch it again. Then again.

Objectivity, Aziraphale thought, was becoming terribly overrated.

He skipped ahead to the wide shots of the bluff, trying to focus on the framing, the light, the shallow depth of field—anything but the lanky figure at the edge of the rock, breeze tugging at his ridiculous sleeveless shirt with the filthy saying on it. Even then, Crowley pulled his focus. His body moved like something unreal, all tension and grace, even when he wasn't climbing. *Especially* when he wasn't climbing. Just standing there, surveying the cliff like there was bad history between the two of them and he meant to hash it out then and there.

He was infuriatingly magnetic. Aziraphale kept catching himself pausing the playback not to analyze a shot, but to admire the shape of Crowley's mouth as he shouted to Nat across the crag or the curve of his spine as he leaned in to check a knot. Even the way his fingers moved—long and precise—around the carabiners on his harness.

Aziraphale's own fingers hovered over the keyboard. He scrubbed back to a short clip Maggie had taken of Crowley adjusting his harness. It wasn't even useful. The audio was muddy, the angle slightly off—but Crowley was laughing in it, genuinely. The type of laugh that curled up at the corners and made his eyes go bright and warm.

Aziraphale didn't mark it for the edit bin. He flagged it for later.

He closed the laptop before he could make a fool of himself and sat back against the headboard, one hand over his eyes.

This was a documentary, not a love letter. He was in treading into dangerous territory.

Aziraphale rolled onto his side and opened his phone, not ready to sleep just yet. Lo-and-behold, with divine timing, his screen lit up with a notification.

< Crowley 

Today•9:40 PM

Crowley

you wanna hear a joke

That depends on the joke.

Crowley

i know u wouldn't take my rock jokes for granite so here goes

Please tell me that wasn't the joke.



Aziraphale exhaled a laugh despite himself, more of a flustered huff than anything else. He felt vaguely scandalized, like someone had just winked at him in church. The sheer commitment to puns was... well. Not admirable, but certainly something. He wasn't going to dignify it with a proper laugh, but his thumbs hovered, waiting.

< Crowley 

Today•9:41 PM

Crowley

lmao

so this climber is standing at the bottom of the wall looking frustrated when a second climber comes up and asks "whats wrong man?"

the first climber says "i don't have a belayer today but this route is calling my name!"

the second climber seems sympathetic, gives the first guy a pat on the back and replies "that sucks dude, but i guess if you cant get belayed then youd better be real good with your hands."



Aziraphale dropped the phone onto his chest like he couldn't bear to look at it a moment longer. He covered his face with both hands and groaned, half in amusement, half in horror. Was this what flirting looked like now? Puns and innuendo and absolutely no punctuation? God help him, he liked it.

< Crowley 

Today•9:44 PM

Oh my God.

Crowley



btw to answer your earlier question...

?

Crowley

i am absolutely free for dinner this week



Aziraphale stared at the screen. Crowley didn't mean that, right? That had to be a joke. Except—he wasn't sure anymore. He waited too long, trying to decide how to read it. Was it flippant? Was it a real offer? Was it a test?

Before he could come up with a reply, Crowley messaged again.

< Crowley 

Today•9:50 PM

Crowley

seriously tho, you did good today

I thought I was going to die

Crowley

nahhhhh, thats just being dramatic, you were fine. ive seen way worse from people who say theyre “experienced”

I'll take the compliment if you insist on giving it.



A tiny flutter kicked up in his chest, the kind that felt like embarrassment and hope had just brushed shoulders in the hallway. Crowley wasn't just being nice. He didn't *have* to say any of this. Aziraphale smiled to himself, then quickly schooled his expression as if Crowley might somehow see it through the screen.

< Crowley 

Today•9:52 PM

Crowley

i do

also

you make very entertaining noises when youre panicking

...

Crowley

adorable ones, dont worry



Aziraphale made a strangled noise into his pillow and considered hurling the phone across the room. This was... was unreasonable. Crowley had no business being this forward, this casual, this infuriatingly charming. Adorable, honestly. The man called him adorable and Aziraphale suddenly wanted to bury his head under every duvet in the house.

< Crowley 

Today•9:53 PM

You're incorrigible.

Crowley

and youre not denying it

...

Thank you, though. For helping me through it. Truly.

Crowley

you're welcome. anytime



The message bubble on-screen lingered in his mind like a touch that wouldn't quite fade. Aziraphale read their entire exchange three times.

He set his phone aside gently, like it might overheat in his hand from all the barely-restrained gay tension, and turned onto his back, exhaling slowly through his nose. His body still ached in scattered pulses—hips, forearms, shoulders—all reminders of how far outside his comfort zone he'd wandered today. And yet, somehow, the part of him that felt the most fragile had nothing to do with muscle or tendon.

He closed his eyes and tried *not* to see Crowley. He tried *not* to picture that insane, red-headed, rock-conquering nymph at the base of the bluff, sunglasses shoved up in his hair, one hand shading his eyes as he looked up with that lopsided smirk and said 'I've got you' like he *meant it*.

It would have been easier, maybe, if Crowley had only been beautiful. Or if he'd only been a massive nuisance. Or if he'd stayed exactly where Aziraphale had tried to keep him: as a subject, a source, a one-season narrative arc.

Had he really tried to do that, though?

Either way, Crowley had wormed his way in—grinning, ridiculous, dramatic, bitchy, grumpy, and inexplicably *kind*, with that laugh that made Aziraphale feel like the earth might drop out from under him and he wouldn't mind.

Aziraphale sighed and rolled over again, pulling a pillow close. He definitely wasn't sleeping anytime soon. He wasn't even sure he wanted to.

[crowley_interview_session3_finalfinalFINAL.mp4]

"I saw your YouTube channel."

"Yeah? How did I look?" Crowley grinned and waggled his eyebrows.

"Oh, you're quite good, at least as far as I can tell. I'm no expert, of course, but clearly you're skilled at what you do."

"T-thanks. I uh... well, I try."

"I understand that you've attained a level of fame, as it were, because of your videos. What is that like? Having fans?"

"Oh, it's great, I'm—I really appreciate all the folks out there that support what I do. I didn't expect it, but it's nice."

Aziraphale thought that sounded like a practiced stock answer, because it probably was.

"Has it changed your relationship with climbing at all?"

"My relationship with... no. No? I don't, I don't think so. I mean, I still climb the things I want to. I'm not so arrogant as to think I'm too famous to slum it or like... that I'll run into paparazzi. Mostly I just meet really nice folks out at the wall who sometimes recognize me and we take a picture together, or whatever. And, well... okay, so one thing that has changed is that I can go climb pretty much anywhere I want now. Back before I had this little bit of support, that would have been a financial impossibility. Now I have the luxury to contemplate some of the wilder dream climbs."

"And your personal relationships?"

"What about them?"

"Has your fame or your success changed those?"

"Not... not really, I don't think. I mean, Nat and Newt are the same as always. And the other climbers I know don't give a fuck how many subscribers I've got."

"I would imagine you have quite a few people out there who want to be involved now, though."

"Ah. No. No, I don't really—I'm not interested in that kind of... thing. I. Look, I've never made friends easily. I have Nat and Newt. They're my people. And traveling so much to climb really doesn't leave any time for anything else. I mean, Jesus, the only person that I text other than those two is my Instacart delivery person. It's just a solitary life, and that's okay. I'm not upset about that or anything. It's just the reality of my... of my career."

Aziraphale, who tried very hard not to get his emotions wrapped up in the subjects of his work, had felt... not pity—that was too patronizing. He'd felt sad for Crowley. That kind of life seemed so desolate.

Then he'd remembered that the only friends he texted were Maggie and Nina. And they were his employees. That was entirely too close to home, entirely too uncomfortable a thought. He'd changed topics before he became too maudlin.

"What does training for a climbing project look like for you?" Aziraphale asked and checked another item off his interview questions list.

"Busy. Really busy. Tiring, achy, usually pretty cold if I train through winter like I am this year."

"Do you do this every year?"

"Most of 'em, yeah. I'm almost always preparing for something. Plus, I gotta keep the content coming for our social media an' all that. There's always something to be done."

"That seems like an intense workload."

“It can be. But I made this bed, so I’ll lie in it,” Crowley chuckled to himself. “Besides, it’s easy to keep pushing forward when you have people who depend on you.” He motioned to Nat and Newt with a grin.

After a beat, Aziraphale asked, “And who do you depend on?”

Crowley’s brows knit together in serious contemplation, and he pouted at the question as if the answer was obvious.

“Well... me.”

Chapter End Notes

 **Join us on the [Belayed Gratification Discord Server](#)** for wild theories and speculation, pictures of rocks, an archive of the illustrations for this story, notices of fic updates, and silly conversation with other weirdos and degenerates, because that is absolutely a thing that we all needed.

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Anchor

Chapter Summary

There was only one sleeping pad.

Chapter Notes

Uhhh... for the record, Crowley and Aziraphale are American in this story. Our setting is an amalgamation of parts of the US Southeast. If you're looking for accents to read their voices in your head, imagine Aziraphale has a neutral, generic American newscaster voice (or anyone with training to neutralize their natural accent) and Crowley has a light Southern drawl.

Also, this chapter is nearly 12k words by itself, lmao. Oops.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The thing about Aziraphale was... he could be a little obtuse in certain situations. Relationships—romantic ones in particular—seemed to bring out the worst of that trait in him. His therapist had ever-so-gently suggested once that it was a kind of willful ignorance borne of a lack of self-confidence. He politely declined to respond to that personal attack and hastily changed the subject to his relationship with his father.

So when Crowley had texted him that ridiculous joke (Aziraphale was ashamed that he laughed at it) and then said he was free for dinner, Aziraphale had assumed—perhaps even convinced himself to assume—that Crowley meant the *whole interaction* as a joke. Of course Crowley, Mister Cool Sunglasses, the semi-famous professional climber with endorsement deals and thirst trap forearms like a classical sculpture, did not *actually* want to go to dinner with him. No chance. And anyway, Aziraphale wasn't about to risk taking that text message seriously and then having to navigate the inevitable rejection.

('oh i was just kiddin lmao,' his text would say, and then Aziraphale would have to fake his own death in civilized society and then move to a hole in the forest and then crawl into the hole and then die.)

So he ignored it. Ardentlly.

Crowley, however... kept on texting him. That was a surprise. Mostly he talked about climbing and the documentary, but as the days passed, Aziraphale started receiving more and more mundane things from him. Things that friends would text each other.

Today•2:45 PM

Crowley

i just convinced newt that you were the guy that did the documentary about mcdonalds
Supersize Me?!

Crowley

yah that one lmaooo

You're absolutely awful.

Crowley

next time youre around newt is gonna ask you how you recovered your health after the all-meds
diet, so play along



Sometimes he would text about whatever he was up to that day.

< Crowley 

Today•12:26 PM

Crowley

just left the climbing gym, good practice today, really wore my hands out. feels good. omw home
now to go to town on a whole case of frozen breakfast burritos. wish me luck

I will pray for your G.I. tract.



Rarely, if their conversations meandered long enough, he would bring up personal topics.

< Crowley 

Today•9:57 PM

Crowley

i don't really date ever. just no time for it, at least not how most people want. i travel too much.

I certainly understand that. Whisking off to film a documentary somewhere remote for eight months is not conducive to stable, long-term relationships.

Crowley

big mood. the last guy i kinda had a casual-but-maybe-not thing with got mad that i was constantly leaving on climbing trips. which, yeah, i get that, i really do, but he was also a climber so i had hoped he might be more understanding.

I didn't even realize you were gay.

Crowley

im not

?

Crowley

you gotta expand your horizons, angel. human sexuality is a spectrum

Bisexual, then?

Crowley

wow ok pansexual erasure there like woah

I'm sorry! I'm not hip to the lingo these days.

Crowley

Imao i know im just fuckin with you

You're incorrigible.



And occasionally, he would turn into a relentless flirt. Those were the conversations that Aziraphale so very ardently did *not* read any further intention into.

< Crowley 

Today•11:15 AM

Crowley

i watched your documentary about the bitcoin thieving kids

Oh no. Not my finest moment.

Crowley

no no no i thought it was really good! i cant believe that one kid was 12!!!! im not sure i even had a concept of money at 12 yo

I definitely did, but point taken. I was fairly obsessed with books as a child and probably would have stolen bitcoin to afford some of the rare editions if that had been an option.

Crowley

fancy angel with expensive tastes eh?

I have been accused of being high maintenance from time to time, yes.

Crowley

id buy you all the most expensive, rarest books, angel. first editions. signed copies. a gutenber bible



Again, Aziraphale worked very hard not to read into it. Crowley was a flirt by nature. He could only imagine what Crowley's text threads must look like with people he was truly interested in. Absolutely unhinged, probably, like if a bodice ripper met a porno script. Or a self-insert smut fanfic.

But Aziraphale was steadfastly not thinking about Crowley in that context. Not at all.

Fortunately, Crowley's messages always rounded back to climbing or the documentary if Aziraphale held strong for long enough.

< Crowley 

Today•8:18 AM

Crowley

going out on an overnight trip to climb next week. you and the crew want to come film?

Do you mean camping?

Crowley

yah. miller's falls again but the overnight will let me get two days of climbs in without so much hike in

Yes, we can do that. What should we bring?

Crowley

camping gear

Well, yes, but what does that entail.

Crowley

have you never been camping

No?

Crowley

smh you sweet summer child

I have too much dignity to shit in the woods.



And Aziraphale certainly was not going to lose that particular closely-held bit of his dignity. Not in this lifetime, thank you very much.

< Crowley 

Today•8:22 AM

Crowley

😂😂😂 ok ok so you can borrow a tent and a backpack from us, we have spares. but youll need to get your own sleeping bag and pad. wear good shoes that support your ankles and bring more socks than you think you need. we can spot you on water bottles and cooking gear but buy some packable food. like freeze dried stuff that you add water to. careful packing stuff you dont need cause the pack will be heavier than you expect when you hike in.

Okay, I can do that.



That was how Aziraphale found himself at an R.E.I. a few days later, much to his total surprise. What was his life now? Should he grow a beard? Maybe buy a hatchback? Stop wearing bow ties?

He wandered up and down the aisles, trying not to look too out of place and checking items off the buy list one by one. A sleeping bag rated for cold temperatures. Good shoes that laced up to his ankles. Like eight pairs of weirdly expensive wool socks. Some sort of horrifying abstract concept

of lasagna in a plastic sack. The guy who helped him pick out a sleeping bag suggested a headlamp, too, so he got one of those.

He was ready. He was prepared. He would *not* shit in the woods.

And, being the good and thoughtful friend he was, he texted Nina and Maggie to ask if they had bought their camping gear yet.



Maggie, Nina, Aziraphale



Today • 1:40 PM

Nina

We're good.

Maggie

Thank you though Mr. Fell! You're a sweetheart.

Did you already go buy it all?

Maggie

Oh no, we had it all already.

Do you two camp? Did I not know this?

Nina

We're lesbians.

Maggie



Is that a stereotype!? Do all lesbians camp!? I've never heard you mention a camping trip before!

Maggie

Nina tell him about the Jeep next!

Nina

You see Mr. Fell, when two women love each other very much...



A few short days of fretting about shitting in the woods later and several disbelieving texts to Nina and Maggie interrogating them about their alleged camping experience, Aziraphale met the climbers and the rest of the documentary crew in the parking lot at Miller's Falls, bright and early once again. It was mid-October, Fall was quickly giving way to Winter, and the frost on the dried grasses and frozen breaths they exhaled were some of the more concerning signs to him that this camping trip might have been a poor choice for his first time roughing it.

Nat was unloading the climbers' van into the gravel lot, occasionally pointing out the gear she was lending to Aziraphale. She was kind enough to bring him some options, which he dutifully tried out and let her fuss over the sizing, especially the backpack. He wasn't sure why it mattered so much, but she insisted that the fit of the pack was critical, and he wasn't about to second-guess the expert. After she was satisfied, she handed a full Nalgene water bottle off to Aziraphale to slip into his borrowed backpack and dropped a devastating bomb on his peaceful morning. "We've got a tent for me and Newt, and Crowley has his, but the spare we had was leaky when I tested it last night, so you'll be sharing."

Record scratch. Freeze frame. DON'T PANIC. Okay, okay, okay, okay. That's fine, that's fine, that's fine.

Aziraphale must have looked alarmed at the news, so Crowley sheepishly intervened. "Sorry. Mine is a two-man tent, though, so we'll have space."

"Well..." Aziraphale began cautiously. "So long as you don't mind."

"Nah, it's fine." Crowley casually waved off his worries as if it were nothing to him. (It couldn't have been further from fine. Crowley had been panicking internally and breaking out into anxiety sweats about it all morning.)

Aziraphale didn't feel any better at the reassurance. It wasn't that he minded sharing a tent with someone, really; it was just sharing with *Crowley* that bothered him.

And why does that bother me so much?

Naturally, Aziraphale did what he does best and ignored it, because stuffing that niggling feeling deep, deep down inside and choosing not to acknowledge it was the safest course of action. And anyway, Crowley was acting normally, or at least as normal as his usual self, so it was probably all a non-issue, right?

Right.

The trek to the crag was easy, cold but dry and sunny, the path now familiar and comfortable. It was starting to feel like old hat to Aziraphale. He idly fantasized about buying a flannel shirt and becoming a mountain man, one with nature, living in a log cabin built with his own two hands. Not that he knew how to build a cabin or hunt his own food or build a fire, but that missed the point! He was outdoorsy!

It was a lovely day, the kind that made Aziraphale feel grateful for everything he had in life. Crowley was smiling and laughing at Nat and Newt the whole way, who were loudly singing TLC's greatest hits. Maggie and Nina took everything in stride as usual, occasionally stopping to get film

and then running to catch up. They looked perfectly at home out in the woods, and Aziraphale wondered once more how he had never known that they were seasoned regulars at this.

The climbing day itself went well too, at least as far as Aziraphale could tell. Crowley and Nat took turns on routes, and occasionally Newt jumped in to try his hand at something that interested him. The group tried to goad Nina into a climb, but she firmly insisted that she was a ground dweller and would have no part in defying the laws of gravity or tempting the fates vis-à-vis the tensile strength of rope. Maggie kept the camera rolling and cheered her support for the climbers.

Their dynamic felt like a group of friends. Aziraphale hadn't experienced that in a long time.

By late afternoon, the climbers were exhausted and the crew flirting with hypothermia. Crowley started begging for a campfire to warm himself up, so Nat made the executive decision to call it a day and decamp back into the woods to set up their humble habitat for the evening.

After the group settled on a flat spot in a clearing near a lazy little stream and cast off their backpacks, Maggie and Nat went to collect firewood. Newt stayed behind to begin unpacking and setting up their kitchen. Nina sought out logs for seating. Crowley waved Aziraphale over and motioned toward the disassembled tents he'd collected in a heap among the duff.

"Let's get these set up, yeah?" he suggested and handed Aziraphale a nylon tent bag to unpack.

Aziraphale dumped the contents on the ground and stared at them hopelessly.

"So, you snap the rods together at the ends and then find the little clips on the tent shell to clip onto the rods," Crowley explained, as if that actually cleared up anything at all about how to turn the heap of tubes into a viable shelter. Aziraphale looked at him with a plea for help in his eyes.

Crowley laughed at his piteous ineptitude, albeit fondly. "Yeah, yeah. Alright. Here, just... just clear some space for the other tents and I'll set up the frames," he relented, much to Aziraphale's relief.

They worked side-by-side quietly, though Aziraphale felt more a hindrance than a help. *Probably not building any log cabins anytime soon, eh?* Still, they assembled the tents quickly and began distributing sleeping gear inside.

"This one is us," Crowley said and pointed to the alarmingly neon orange tent, like construction cone orange. Hazard orange. The kind of orange that sort of hurt to look at directly. "Lay out your bag there. But no shoes inside the tent!"

Aziraphale nodded obediently and shucked off his shoes in the vestibule before clambering inside and arranging his effects.

Crowley followed him in shortly with his own bedding for the night, but paused and gave Aziraphale a curious look.

"Where's your pad?" Crowley asked as he lifted the corner of Aziraphale's brand-new sleeping bag to peek under.

"Pad?"

"Sleeping pad. Goes under the bag?"

"Oh! I didn't know that I needed one," Aziraphale said, and Crowley could hear the accusation.

“I definitely said it in the text,” he defended.

“You most certainly did not, else I would have bought one!”

A wicked smile spread across his face as Crowley held up a single finger— *hold on a moment* . He gleefully pulled his phone from his pocket, scrolled through his texts, and, upon finding his prize, presented it to Aziraphale.

“Ah. So you did. Well, I have the sleeping bag, anyway. That should be fine.”

“Uh-huh. Hey, unrelated question, but do you know what happens to synthetic down when you crush it between, say, a human body and the cold, unforgiving winter ground?”

“I’ll be fine, Crowley.” Aziraphale had his pride, after all.

“Whatever you say, Angel.” Crowley smirked, fluffed his silly little travel pillow, and exited the tent with enviable grace in those ridiculously long limbs. The effect was somewhat dampened, however, when he slipped into a pair of red Crocs before stepping out of the vestibule. Aziraphale couldn’t say why exactly that made him smile, but it did.

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. Crowley went to the stream to fill their water skins and treat the water for safe drinking, while Nina showed Aziraphale how to build a proper fire. Newt and Maggie manned the JetBoils and prepared all of their atrocious packaged dinners—Aziraphale made a pact with himself to never eat lasagna from a bag again. The group ended their evening fireside, chatting about their day and the documentary, and before long, far earlier than any normal adult bedtime in Aziraphale’s opinion, they let the fire die down, went to the water skins to brush their teeth with travel size toothbrushes, and retreated to their tents to sleep.

Crowley was last into the tent. He zipped it up behind him before turning to Aziraphale with a salacious grin and said, “So we’re finally alone.”

Aziraphale laughed and stuffed his sleeping attire into his bag to change modestly once he tucked inside. Crowley seemed to have no such compunctions and stripped to his boxers immediately.

Oh no.

Aziraphale tried to avert his gaze, but apparently a ‘two-man tent’ was more like ‘one man and a very intimate friend’ because there wasn’t any place to stare that didn’t have Crowley in sight, at least peripherally.

Of course, of-fucking-course, the man’s body was stunning, lean and strong, corded muscle around his slight shoulders and chest, but with the tiniest little waist that made Aziraphale’s hands restless to grab Crowley and place him wherever he wanted. The telltale, middle-aged roll just below his belly button looked soft and biteable, and that vein, *dear Heaven above, the vein* that ran up the underside of his forearm was like a siren song. Aziraphale was suddenly all too ready to be dashed against the rocks.

To Aziraphale’s great lament, Crowley pulled on a pair of soft-looking black pajama bottoms and slipped into his sleeping bag.

“Turn out the light whenever you’re done,” he said, and Aziraphale could only nod dumbly.

He made quick work of sliding into his own sleeping bag, changing his clothes, and turning out the small flashlight hanging from the peak of the tent frame. He settled in to sleep and drifted off quickly, more tired than he'd realized.

Unfortunately, it was cold. Like, really, really, cold and the temperature was only dropping. In the small hours of the morning he woke, disoriented and confused about why his bedroom was suddenly a blast chiller.

He heard Crowley's even breathing to his right.

Oh, that's right. Camping.

Aziraphale shivered with his whole body. He was certain his teeth would start chattering at any moment. He rubbed his feet together to try to warm them up, to no avail. He'd even worn his wool socks to bed.

Crowley was absolutely correct about what happens to sleeping bags when you squish them between a body and the cold ground—they retain zero heat. Accordingly, Aziraphale's entire left side was cooling to ground temperature faster than his body could heat up, even with the six packets of Hot Hands he had stuffed in his sleeping bag.

He flipped onto his right side noisily, facing toward Crowley. The fabric of the sleeping bag made obnoxiously loud *swish-swish* sounds. Crowley slept peacefully, snuggled in his very warm sleeping bag on his very warm sleeping pad, and Aziraphale was so jealous he felt like he might be sick. He struggled in vain for several minutes to warm his fingers and toes.

Finally, Aziraphale heard "You okay, Angel?" from the dark somewhere in front of him.

"I'm fine," he replied, but even he could hear how very *not fine* he was from his tone of voice.

Crowley's sleeping bag *swish-swished* as he ostensibly sat up. "No, you're not. You're freezing over there. Trust me, I made the same mistake the first time I did an overnight camp. Thermarests were like sixty bucks that I didn't have, and it was spring anyway, so I figured I'd be alright. Didn't work out that way."

Aziraphale huffed and clawed his way out of his bag to look in Crowley's direction. "Well, what do you suggest I do?"

"Come over here."

"What?"

"Yeah, my sleeping pad is one of the extra-wide ones, so it can almost fit two people. It'll be better than nothing, promise."

"I'm not going to kick you off your own—"

"You won't. We can both fit. Won't be great, but it won't be 'freezing to death', either."

Aziraphale sighed and scrubbed his cold face with his frozen icicle fingers. "Fine, alright, alright." He lost the last shreds of his dignity as he wormed his way over toward Crowley by wiggling in his sleeping bag. Fortunately it was pitch black in the tent.

He heard Crowley scooting to the side and the scrape of the sleeping pad being dragged across the tent floor. "C'mon, up here," Crowley said, and patted the empty spot on the pad. Aziraphale rolled on and settled himself.

"There, that's better."

Aziraphale nodded. "Thank you."

"No problem," Crowley said. Then Aziraphale heard the telltale zip of his bag sliding open. "Now unzip your bag all the way 'round."

"What? Why?"

"Sleeping bags can zip together. It'll keep you from rolling off the pad and make a big bubble of warmth for ya if I'm in there, too."

Aziraphale froze on the spot, though not yet literally. Crowley did not just suggest one of the cheesiest, porniest tropes of all time, right? Was the author of this ridiculous queer romcom out of their mind or just so desperate to advance the story that they'd sink to trawling the literary seabed for plot devices?

Crowley obviously noticed his hesitation. How could he not? "Oh, c'mon, if you need to say 'no homo' while we sleep side-by-side under the same blanket then do it, but unzip your damn bag."

Aziraphale pursed his lips and gave Crowley an unimpressed stare that he couldn't even see. He hoped that the sheer, raw power of his unamused expression would nevertheless be transmitted through the dark as he fumbled his numb fingers around the bag's perimeter in search of the zipper pull.

"There ya go. Okay, now slide my bag underneath you... Yep. And give me the edge of yours... There it is. And we zip 'em together!" Crowley sounded so triumphant in his cleverness that Aziraphale couldn't help but smile as he settled in.

Crowley lay back down, too, on his side, facing Aziraphale, and fluffed his travel pillow. "Alright, now you roll over this way and be the little spoon."

"Now you're kidding with me."

"No homo," Crowley whispered, and Aziraphale dissolved into peals of laughter.

"You're ridiculous," Aziraphale said into the dark with a smile in his voice.

"Yeah," Crowley replied softly. It almost sounded wistful.

"This is much warmer, though," Aziraphale admitted.

"It is."

"Not much space, though," he groused.

"Nope."

"Hm."

Aziraphale lay there for a long moment, contemplating the heat he could feel radiating off Crowley, how he smelled—part sweat, part forest, overlaid with some kind of spicy shampoo or cologne, maybe—and the sensation of Crowley's exhalation light against the side of his face. He wasn't sure how he could tell, but he was certain that Crowley was wide awake and staring toward him.

Finally, Crowley quietly said: "You're not great at picking up on subtleties, are you?"

Aziraphale snorted, actually snorted. God, how embarrassing. "You are not subtle, my dear."

"No?"

"No," Aziraphale giggled.

"So you're just not interested, then? S'okay if so, I—I mean I'd be disappointed but, you know, I'm uhh... I'm not gonna be an asshole about it. That's—that's fine," Crowley said, sounding like he was trying to convince himself more than anything. "We've just had this thing that felt a bit more than friendly, at least that was my impression, and I thought I was, err, I guess I actually *was* being pretty unsubtle about it, which, you know, sorry about that if you weren't actually into it but I—"

Aziraphale interrupted, "You're really quite cute when you're nervous and you ramble like that."

"Yeah?" That wistful quality returned to Crowley's voice. Maybe some nerves, too.

"Yes."

"So is that... some homo?" he asked hopefully.

"Could be," Aziraphale said.

"Can I—would you mind if—erm... is it too forward to ask if—" Crowley was really unbearably adorable when he was nervous.

"I'm not having sex in a tent in winter," Aziraphale deadpanned, and Crowley made an indignant noise.

"No! No. No, no. Just, maybe, could I touch you? Hands! Just hands. We can... not like—m'not—"

"You want to hold hands?" Aziraphale supplied, trying to offer Crowley a lifeline.

"Yeah," Crowley laughed quietly. Aziraphale thought he had such a lovely laugh. "Like, desperately."

Aziraphale reached out blindly and, not realizing how very close they actually were, pressed his palm into Crowley's bare chest. *Oh, dear god, rock climber chest muscles.* He started to pull away and apologize, but Crowley caught his hand and laced their fingers together, pressing Aziraphale more firmly in place.

"Oh," Aziraphale breathed quietly into the still night.

"Yeah?" Crowley sounded so hopeful.

"Yes."

“Your hands are fuckin’ frozen, baby,” he laughed and wrapped Aziraphale’s hand up tighter.

“Baby?” Aziraphale asked, surprised at the pet name, but not displeased.

“No? Don’t like that one?”

“Well, I didn’t necessarily say that.”

“Angel?” Crowley tried again.

“Wait a minute. Have you been calling me that as a pet name this whole time?” Aziraphale accused, but with no real malice behind it.

“...No?” Crowley lied through his teeth, like a liar.

“Wow, you really aren’t very subtle at all, are you?” Aziraphale chuckled and twisted their fingers together a little more.

“Not a bit. Not with you.” Crowley squeezed his hand in return and shifted a little closer in their sleeping bag. “Bring your toes over here, too.”

They intertwined their legs. Crowley toed his and Aziraphale’s socks off so they could touch skin-to-skin.

“You know, oddly enough, I actually wasn’t certain that you were coming on to me,” Aziraphale admitted.

“Really? After all that?”

“Mmhm. Call it denial, I suppose.”

“Seriously.”

“You were an absolute shit in the beginning, though. And you do flirt with everyone.”

“Guilty as charged,” Crowley snickered.

“And, well, look at you. I mean I’m...”

Crowley interrupted, “You’re gorgeous.”

Aziraphale flushed red hot. No one had said anything like that to him in years, and the ease and earnestness with which Crowley complimented him almost made Aziraphale believe it.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. S’ttrue,” Crowley affirmed and squeezed his hand again. Aziraphale could feel that blissful heat seeping back into his fingers and a spark of contentment in his belly.

They laid basking contently in each other’s presence; in the dark, quiet privacy of a cold winter night miles from civilization until, finally, they slept.

Crowley woke slowly, groggy from the earliness of the hour, the frigid air in the tent, and the lingering ache of exertion from the day prior. He couldn't complain too much, though, because Aziraphale was pressed warmly to his back with an arm slung possessively over Crowley's waist—and wasn't that something? Crowley couldn't recall the last time he'd woken up next to someone else, unless you counted that one time when Newt had got hammered and fell asleep in Crowley's bed because he'd forgot where his and Nat's bedroom was.

Crowley could hear Nat and Newt chatting quietly outside, along with the crackle of the fire being re-stoked. With any luck, Nat would make some instant coffee before Crowley ambled out of the tent into the chill and spare them all at least twenty minutes of his pre-caffeine bitching. He grabbed his phone from the little mesh pocket on the tent wall and checked the time as he wiped the sleep out of his eyes. It was way, way, way too early, in his opinion. He made a disgusted noise and dropped his phone to the side.

Aziraphale stirred then, his hand suddenly clenching at Crowley's belly and his arm tightening its hold around Crowley's middle .

Fuck, that felt good.

"Mmmwake," Aziraphale mumbled, and Crowley turned his head to peek at him. One of Aziraphale's eyes was cracked open but bleary with sleep, and the way his white blond cloud of hair was smushed up on one side was weirdly attractive. It made Crowley smile the kind of affectionate smile that he didn't often get to use.

"Say again?" he asked.

Aziraphale blinked slowly as if trying to parse the question, then cleared his throat and sat up a bit, leaning onto his elbow. Not far enough to lose his possessive hold on Crowley, though.

"I said I'm awake."

Crowley rather liked how his voice sounded all gravelly when he was sleepy.

"Yeah, me too, unfortunately. I vote we go back to sleep," he said and grabbed Aziraphale's wrist to tug his arm into a tighter embrace as he settled back into the comfortable warmth of their sleeping bag. Aziraphale was immediately and almost too easily convinced of that course of action and followed suit.

After a lazy moment of basking in their shared heat in the pre-dawn stillness, Aziraphale asked. "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Better'n I have in ages," Crowley replied.

"Mm. Me too," Aziraphale nodded and agreed.

"Not too cold?"

"Not cold at all."

"Glad you didn't freeze to death, then."

“As am I. Would have been terribly inconvenient for you to explain to the others.”

“Mmyeah. Plus, getting your frozen corpse out of the woods? Fuckin’ nightmare.”

Aziraphale chuckled and pressed his forehead against the nape of Crowley’s neck. “I’d hate to be an inconvenience to you.”

A shiver zipped down Crowley’s spine from the warm touch against *that spot*, the one that always got him going. “Nah. Never. You’re quite convenient.”

“Flirt.”

“Yup.”

“Do you have your bottle of mouthwash in here, by chance?” Aziraphale asked.

“Mmn... I think so. Hold on a sec,” Crowley said and tapped at Aziraphale’s arm to release his hold. Aziraphale obliged him, and Crowley half rolled out of their makeshift bed to dig through his toiletry bag. He presented the little travel-sized bottle to Aziraphale proudly.

“Oh, perfect. Thank you, my dear.” Aziraphale took the bottle, cracked it open, took a swig, and swished it around for a moment, then smiled.

Crowley raised an eyebrow. “Did you just swallow that?”

“I did. What else was I supposed to do? Spit it out on the tent floor?”

“Or an empty bottle. Or unzip the tent a little and spit outside. Or—”

“Hush. Here, now you,” Aziraphale interrupted by pressing the bottle back into Crowley’s hand. Crowley made a big show of swishing and spitting into a discarded plastic bottle, to which Aziraphale rolled his eyes.

“Yes, yes. You’re the superior outdoorsman, and I am suitably shamed for my ignorance. Now, please get back down here so that I can kiss you?”

At that, Crowley scrambled as fast as he could back into position inside their sleeping bag, lying on his side to face Aziraphale. Aziraphale reached his arm around Crowley’s waist again to pull him close.

“Is this alright?” Aziraphale murmured.

“Very fuckin’ alright,” Crowley said, breathless, nodding like a man who’d just won the lottery and wasn’t sure if he could cash it in without all his long-lost relatives coming out of the woodwork.

Aziraphale brought his free hand up to touch Crowley’s chin, not grabbing or directing or using force, just anchoring him in place, firmly but sweetly. Crowley’s heart rabbited in his chest. He hadn’t kissed anyone in a long time, either, and certainly not anyone for whom he felt more than a passing, urgent lust that could be resolved without having an awkward breakfast together.

“This alright, too?”

“Mmhm.”

Aziraphale dipped his head in and pressed his lips to Crowley's, gentle and chaste and unhurried. It was soft, sweet, and more than a little minty, which magnified with the chill in the air. Crowley, however, being the impulsive mess he was, fucking *whined*, which caused Aziraphale to chuckle and break their kiss.

"Really now?" He teased with an arched brow.

"Fuck. Yeah. Yeah, yes. More of that, like, like immediately," Crowley demanded and clutched at Aziraphale's sleep shirt to pull him in. Their second kiss was much less reserved than the first; awkward, even, in its needy intensity. A kind of reckless desperation born in the split second between Aziraphale's eyebrow raising and Crowley's emphatic assent that was messy and imperfect. They hadn't quite met at the same beat of the rhythm yet; there was a bit too much tongue, and they bumped noses, which caused Aziraphale to huff another laugh. Crowley retaliated by nipping at his lower lip with a playful growl.

"So that's how this is going to be?" Aziraphale asked as they withdrew.

"Mmhm," Crowley agreed with a slow, lust-drunk nod.

"Is it too forward of me at this point to ask if you need to be put in your place?"

oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh f
— (**Author's Note: Here Crowley is experiencing a sort of mental white noise that just so happens, in his particular case, to manifest as a panicked anthropomorphization of a swear word skittering full tilt from one room of his mind palace to the other with no clear direction, much like a cat at two in the morning.**)

"Nuh uh." Crowley mumbled, now rendered fully disyllabic and shaking his head dumbly.

"'No, it's not too forward,' or 'no, you don't need to be put in your place?'" Aziraphale asked, determined to make Crowley use full sentences.

Crowley tried to regain his composure. He really did. He drew up a deep breath and slowly, slowly, *slowly* exhaled, raked his fingers through his hair, then scrubbed his hands across his face. "*Hnnngk*, not too forward. An' yeah, I *absolutely* need to be put in my place like, stat."

Aziraphale giggled, and his suave affectation dissolved on the giddy bubbles. Crowley found it too irresistible and swept back in with the tide to kiss him again, digging his fingers into Aziraphale's curls at the nape of his neck and dragging them both back into the undertow.

That time, the third kiss—that time they converged deftly on the same point, lips meeting as Aziraphale rolled to his back and pulled Crowley's body half on top of him. Crowley finally realized what people meant when they said they felt like floating. They licked into each other's mouths greedily as Aziraphale trailed searing hot paths with his hands from the tops of Crowley's shoulders, down his back, and rested just above his ass with a possessiveness that made Crowley feel manic. He, a grown man of several decades, *whimpered* and arched his back into it.

Aziraphale grabbed his waist and pulled away, just a little, with a pained expression like it hurt to back down. "We... we should stop. I don't want to, but we should. Imagine going out there with a hard-on and having to bear the scrutiny of those four," he said, giving a pointed glance at the tent door.

Crowley was not so responsible. He rarely was. Call it a character flaw.

He pushed back into Aziraphale, wound his arms more fully around the other man's neck, and if he'd been five seconds further in time, he would have started grinding against his thigh. "Fuck, why you gotta bring facts and logic into this? Besides, my dick needed that memo twenty minutes ago. The situation over here is already pretty dire."

"You're like a teenager," Aziraphale chided and clicked his tongue.

"Can't help it, Angel. I've always been like this," Crowley lamented and made a plaintive noise in the back of his throat as he wiggled despondently.

"Easy?" Aziraphale suggested with a cheeky grin.

"Hey!" Crowley slapped ineffectually at his shoulder in mock outrage.

"I'm only riling you up," Aziraphale conceded as he slipped his fingers just inside the waistband of Crowley's sleep pants.

"Yeah, you are," Crowley griped. "Don't be so fuckin' smug about it. It's been a while, too, so I'm like... primed."

"Shall we get ourselves orderly again and join the others now, before this escalates any further?"

With a long, dramatic groan, Crowley buried his face into Aziraphale's neck and inhaled deeply. He allowed himself a long moment to enjoy the heat between their bodies and the smell of Aziraphale's laundry detergent and the way having his head tucked between Aziraphale's neck and shoulder muffled all the ambient noise, like being underwater.

"Alright. Alright. Fine," he said as he retreated from the lingering storm surge of oxytocin cyclically lighting up and soothing his nerve endings down to his fingertips.

"You should probably climb today, anyway."

"Or we could just call it a day and drive to the nearest hotel?" You couldn't blame Crowley for trying.

"I'm not sure that would be any less telling than the two of us emerging from this tent with... well..."

"Tents?" Crowley cheesed and waggled his brows as he grabbed for his day clothes in his pack at the corner of the tent.

"Precisely," Aziraphale said and pursed his lips, trying to act disappointed in Crowley's crassness.

"Don't like it when you're right," Crowley pouted.

"Well then, I have some terrible news for you, my dear."

"Yeah, yeah. See if I make out with *you* again," he threatened, though the effect was somewhat lessened as he was fighting with the armholes of his shirt at that moment.

"Mmm, I am betting that you will."

“Hah! Yeah, you’re right. I definitely will,” Crowley grinned, leaned in to peck one last kiss to Aziraphale’s lips, and then unzipped the tent flap.

Outside, Nat and Newt were huddled around the growing fire, each nursing a steaming aluminum mug.

“Mornin’,” Crowley called out, and Nat and Newt both greeted him in turn.

“Coffee?” Newt offered brightly.

“Oh, fuck yes, please. Love you, Newty, baby,” Crowley said as he wrapped his hand around Newt’s head and planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek as he accepted a cup.

“Sleep okay?” Nat asked from behind her mug, and Crowley instantly sensed something suspicious in her tone.

“Yeah, s’alright,” Crowley said through a chill shiver as he sat down on one of the logs placed around the fire pit. “You?”

“Well, it would have been decent if our tent hadn’t been so close to yours,” Nat said with a sharp, knowing tone. Blood in the water. Chum.

Crowley gulped—literally gulped nervously, like a badly written character in an author’s first attempt at writing romance—and feigned ignorance. “Oh?” He casually sipped his coffee and burned his tongue for his efforts.

“Yeah, funny thing, you know? Listening to you whisper sweet nothings to your boyfriend kept me awake in abject horror for *hours*.” She had a vicious, accusatory smirk that Crowley really wanted to hate in that moment. Nevertheless, he blanched white.

Newt snickered, and Crowley felt that betrayal keenly.

“The jig is up, then?” Aziraphale asked as he poked his head out of their tent.

“Way up,” Crowley groaned and fixed his attention firmly on his coffee. It was *fascinating*, truly.

“Ah, well. We tried,” Aziraphale shrugged as he sat down on the log nearest Crowley.

“Did you, though?” Nat asked with a look of disbelief.

Crowley kicked toward Nat’s shin, but she dodged him with a gleeful cackle.

“Let’s just get on with the climbing, can we?” He tried to divert the conversation. He really did.

“If only I’d known all these years that I could get Anthony J. Crowley to focus on his career simply by heckling his sex life.”

“Jay?” Aziraphale looked at him in surprise.

Nat jumped in before Crowley could answer. “It stands for ‘procrastination’ but the J is silent.”

“Actually, it’s Janthony,” Newt corrected smartly.

“Jessica,” Nat added.

“Job?”

“Jebediah.”

Crowley sighed and ignored the two idiots he called friends, addressing Aziraphale pointedly. “It’s just a J. I think my mom meant to say Jay, like j-a-y, but the hospital wrote it down on my birth certificate as j-period, because I guess that’s a thing? So yeah. Just a J.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Anthony Just-A-J Crowley,” Aziraphale smiled and stuck out his hand for a shake.

“Did you seriously fuck without knowing each other’s names?” Nat asked.

Crowley felt affronted. “Okay, one, we did not fuck. It was like twenty-five degrees overnight. In a tent. In the woods. No. Two, he already knew my name from the interviews like... way back.”

Ever-so-helpful, Aziraphale chimed in: “Three, I hardly need to know someone’s middle name to sleep with them.”

“You old tart!” Crowley yelped and looked scandalized.

Aziraphale, cool as a chilled cucumber, leveled a dispassionate stare at him. “Darling, I lived through the late nineties and early aughts as a gay man. I didn’t even need to know their *given name*.”

Crowley laughed. “Way to make a boy feel special, Jesus Christ.”

“Please, mister shirtless climbing photo thirst trap.”

“Liked those, did you?” Crowley grinned and cut a glance at Nat, who looked disgusted, possibly moments away from throwing up right into the fire pit.

“Mmhm.” Aziraphale hummed his agreement salaciously, a faraway look in his eye.

And wasn’t that interesting?

Crowley tucked that little revelation away somewhere deep, for later.

Then he decided to go for broke, just to twist the knife in Nat’s side. “Got those little dimples just above my ass that—”

“Oh, I am aware,” Aziraphale interjected with a cheeky smile.

“Aight,” Nat declared as she slapped her knees and stood, “I’mma head out.”

“Please take me with you. I don’t wanna watch this,” Newt implored and quickly followed.

Crowley and Aziraphale shared a little grin between them as they sipped their weak instant coffee. Together.

Did Crowley just get a partner in crime?

As practice days go, Crowley'd had better. He'd sent all the routes he planned without issue, sure, but he wasn't breaking any new ground. He wasn't pushing himself. He definitely wasn't *in the zone*.

Honestly, he wasn't focused on climbing in the slightest. His hands were on the rock, but his head was somewhere else entirely. Every handhold had the wrong texture. Every time he tried to think out the complex moves, he thought of Aziraphale instead. Nat had asked him *twice* if he was alright.

He didn't really have any space in his head for anything other than a constant low-grade chant of: "Angel Angel Angel Angel Angel."

One off day wouldn't kill him. Probably. And anyway, Maggie seemed delighted to get some decent footage of him doing climbs by the book. And Maggie being delighted put everyone else in a good mood. Her joy was strangely infectious like that.

So it was an easy climbing day. The weather was pleasant, even if it was cold. The company was better, and Crowley fulfilled his contractual obligations. What more could a man ask for?

Well...

"I'm still free for dinner, you know," Crowley said with a sly smile.

The climbers and the crew were in the gravel parking lot once again, loading their cars up with their bags and gear.

Aziraphale didn't miss a beat. "Well, I'd be remiss not to feed you, wouldn't I?"

"Mmhm. Might starve." Crowley gestured at himself. "See? Got ribs sticking out an' everything."

Aziraphale squinted at him. "That is a lie, and you know it."

Crowley spread his arms wide, dramatically offended. "This is what malnutrition looks like."

"Mmhm. You know there are protein bars in your backpack, right?"

Crowley narrowed his eyes. "You been riflin' through my sack, Angel?"

"I *might* have been looking for that pack of gum I saw you with yesterday."

"Unbelievable! That's a violation of my civil liberties."

"I have a distinct feeling that a court of law would side with me," Aziraphale said, tossing his backpack into the trunk and walking around to face Crowley. "Now. Would you like it if I cooked for you?"

"Oh, fuck yes I would." Not even a question. Not even something Crowley needed to think about. More time with this ridiculous angel of a man? Always. Yes. Please.

“Unless you’d prefer a restaurant,” Aziraphale offered, but Crowley hardly needed to be around other people and in a place where he’d have to physically restrain himself next time they met.

“No, no, no,” Crowley protested immediately, “I want the whole thing. The Kiss the Cook apron. Snoopin’ through your junk drawers while you’re out of the room. Bad family photos.”

Aziraphale laughed fondly. “Tomorrow?”

It made something in Crowley’s gut curl up in a ray of warm sunshine and settle in for a comfy nap. He wanted to bask in that fondness for hours. Weeks. The rest of his life, if anyone was asking.

“I’d love to.”

Crowley wasn’t sure what the etiquette was for saying goodbye to your not-yet-fuckbuddy, but he was pretty sure that it didn’t involve stuffing his hands into his pockets and shuffling awkwardly from foot to foot as he stood beside Aziraphale’s car. Still, he couldn’t figure out what else to do but stand there and look besotted.

“Six-thirty? Seven?” Aziraphale asked.

“That’s a little early in the morning for dinner, but m’not gonna say no to the extra time with you, either.”

Aziraphale laughed again, and Crowley made it his life’s mission to cause that laughter as often as possible until the day he died.

“It’s a date, then. I’ll see you for… breakfast?” Aziraphale asked as he opens his car door.

“What, really?” Crowley was genuinely surprised that Aziraphale was willing to go along with his needy bullshit.

“Mmhm.”

“Is that breakfast tomorrow morning or breakfast the day after?” He was a weak and greedy man, and he knew it. No shame. In for a penny…

To Crowley’s surprise, Aziraphale said: “Both?”

He hadn’t expected—well, that was—oh god. “Yeah. Yeah, both.”

“Good,” Aziraphale nodded once, looking as pleased as can be, and began to close his car door.

At the feeling of imminent loss, Crowley was suddenly possessed, compelled by feet no longer under his control. He surged forward without thinking, as though pulled by some irresistible gravity, like Aziraphale had his own personal orbit. He caught him in the most awkward stance—halfway in the driver’s seat, hand clutching the door handle—and kissed him just one more time.

Would he see him again tomorrow? Sure. But Crowley wasn’t certain he could wait that long.

It was quick, affectionate—just a statement of intent. He didn’t want to deal with Nat and Newt the whole car ride home if they watched him make out with Aziraphale in the parking lot.

“Just had to do that one more time before you go,” Crowley whispered as he withdrew.

“You’re a terrible romantic.”

“I know,” Crowley said with a little shrug, like *what are you gonna do about it?*

“See you tomorrow, my dear.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.”

Aziraphale smiled at him once more and pulled out of the parking lot. Crowley watched him go.

For a few seconds after the car vanished down the gravel road, he stayed exactly where he was—hands still in his pockets, heart tripping over itself to keep up with the adrenaline rush, and a dumb little smile pulling at one corner of his mouth.

He felt unmoored. Untethered. There was too much sky and too much quiet. His body felt like it had just finished falling, but never quite landed.

He took a slow breath and stared out at the empty stretch of road. He let the want in his chest go slack and, just before he could drift too far, he thought of tomorrow. And it held.

Crowley was not spared the thorough razzing from Nat and Newt on the drive home, despite his best efforts.

“So, are you two dating now?” Nat asked innocently from her perch in the passenger’s seat and turned to look at Crowley, who had stretched out across the back seats and decided to check the fuck out for the rest of the ride.

He glared at her over the top edge of his phone.

“What?! It’s a legitimate question,” she defended and raised her hands as if to surrender, but the little smirk twitching at the corner of her mouth gave her motives away.

Crowley sighed. “We’re going on A date, yeah. I mean, kind of. But we’re not anything serious.”

“Yet!” Newt added happily as he flipped on the turn signal and steered their van out onto the highway.

“No. No ‘yet’ about it. I’m just going over to his place tomorrow to have some food and hang out.”

“To fuck,” Nat corrected dryly.

“Yes, to fuck. So it’s not even really a date,” Crowley shrugged and did his best imitation of nonchalance. He tried to refocus on the video of two crows playing in the snow on his Instagram feed and prayed that the conversation was done.

No such luck, old boy.

“Mmhm.” Nat raised her eyebrows and made this face like she could divine all of Crowley’s secrets without him saying a word. Honestly, he wasn’t sure that she *couldn’t*, and that terrified him more than a little.

“What?!” He asked.

“You like him.” She was properly smirking, now.

Crowley rolled his eyes. “Of course I do, otherwise why would I go see him tomorrow?”

“You know what I mean,” Nat said and stared at him pointedly.

“This is not a conversation we are having.”

Newt piped up again, ever so helpful, “This actually sounds like a conversation you are definitely having.”

“Thank you, Newton, your contributions are always such a pleasure,” Crowley said and kicked the back of the driver’s seat.

“I’m an absolute delight,” Newt glanced up to look at him in the rear view mirror and smiled widely.

“That you are, baby,” Nat smiled at Newt and ruffled his hair.

Crowley doom scrolled his social media for a few more minutes, until Nat spoke up again.

“Aziraphale is a nice man. Don’t fuck this up. He could be good for you.”

“Nat, I’m not—” Crowley began to protest, but Nat cut in quickly.

“No, no, no, I know. Crowley doesn’t date, no serious relationships, very fuckboy of you, yeah, yeah, whatever,” Nat conceded, sounding thoroughly exhausted by his bullshit, “But you *could*. And like I said, Aziraphale seems like a good one. I’m not gonna meddle or anything, I’m just saying.”

“This feels like meddling,” Crowley grumbled.

“Well, it isn’t,” Nat said firmly. “This is just a friend telling you not to be blind to what’s right in front of you.”

“Haven’t you two been texting for weeks now?” Newt asked, and Crowley suddenly wanted to fling the van door open and throw himself out onto the pavement at speed.

“What?! Have you? How did I not know this?” Nat demanded shrilly and swung back around to stare at Crowley.

“Why do you think he’s been smiling at his phone so much lately?” Newt asked. He sounded so smug.

“Gods above, you’re really into him!” Nat was now gleeful, and Crowley wanted to die.

“So into him,” Newt added with a little wiggle in his seat.

“Wow. Okay, so... okay,” Nat started to say, but Crowley intervened before she could embarrass him any further.

“Yeah, we’ve been texting, like *you* told me to do. It’s not a big deal.”

“Oh, I most definitely did not tell you to start a relationship with the man via SMS, but I’m so glad you did.” She tittered and seemed all too pleased with herself.

“It’s not a relationship! Jesus Christ, can we please drop this?” Crowley was reaching a point of actual frustration, and very much did not want to end up snapping and saying something bitchy that he’d have to grovel about later.

Nat, outright giggling, threw him a bone. “Fine, fine. Message received. Still, I’m happy for you. And I’ll leave it at that.”

“Good,” Crowley said with a ‘this topic is closed’ kind of finality, and sank back into his comfortable slouch.

He did not miss the knowing glance and little smiles that Nat and Newt gave each other, however. He simply chose to be the bigger man and not acknowledge them.

“Sooooo, Cracker Barrel for late lunch? Dinner? Linner?” Newt asked.

“Always! Lemme get Maps open and see which exit we’re closest to,” Nat agreed and finally, *finally* set her focus on something other than Crowley’s love life.

A sojourn to Cracker Barrel after an overnight camping trip was a group tradition, and they weren’t about to miss out on the hokey down-home atmosphere and cholesterol just to harass Crowley about his tastes in men.

After acquiring a heart condition from the artery-clogging goodness, the remainder of the drive back home was quiet, sated by the type of food coma that only cheesy hash brown casserole and greasy fried eggs could provide. Crowley ended up napping in the back seat while Nat and Newt listened to their Spotify playlists and discussed which rap album of the 1990s ‘changed the game.’

They pulled up to their house in the early evening; the winter sun had already set a half hour prior. They went about unloading their gear as they had hundreds of times before, quick and efficient. Crowley was thankful that Nat and Newt were also worn out from the day and didn’t bring Aziraphale up again. They stowed away their unused consumables in the kitchen and sorted the climbing and camping gear on the living room floor in peaceful, blissful silence, falling easily back into the old routine they all knew so well.

Afterward, they bid each other goodnight and Crowley descended into his lair for some much-needed alone time. No, not like that. He only had so many social spoons to use in a day, and very much valued his privacy after too much human interaction.

He flopped out on his bed with a heavy sigh of relief, thrilled to be horizontal on a familiar soft surface. He planned to sleep *so hard* that night. He was legitimately excited about it. So middle-aged of him.

He had been face-planted into his duvet for fifteen or so minutes, flirting with the dreamy, floaty edges of sleep, when he heard a quiet *ding!* from his phone. He honestly had half a mind to just

ignore it, but the niggling *what if?* part of his brain was not so easily quieted. He groaned and reached for his pocket, grabbed his phone, and checked his messages.

In an absolute first, Aziraphale had texted Crowley out of the blue. With his address, of course, and a question.

< Aziraphale 

Today•8:41 PM

Aziraphale

What kind of food would you prefer for breakfast?



Good thing he'd decided to listen to his instinct.

< Aziraphale 

Today•8:42 PM

im gonna be real with you and i need you to not judge me

Aziraphale

Well, that doesn't bode well at all. Go on.



Crowley grinned and pushed up onto his elbows to better type out a response.

< Aziraphale 

Today•8:43 PM

i don't think ive eaten breakfast this decade

Aziraphale

I am devastated for you. We must correct that A.S.A.P. Waffles? Omelettes? Pancakes?

literally any of the above. my usual is black coffee and a cigarette

Aziraphale

And how are those stomach ulcers treating you?



That made Crowley laugh. Like, out loud, not just the usual slightly humored exhale of a laugh that typically accompanied a “lmao.”

< Aziraphale 

Today•8:49 PM

lmao, nothing that a handful of tums every morning can't fix

Aziraphale

I am not sure if I'm more impressed that you've made it to our age with the diet of a graduate student or horrified at the vitamin deficiencies that you're inevitably harboring.

Also, you smoke?

yeah. dirty habit i know. that bother you? not inside the house or anything. just one in the morning and whenever i wanna calm the ol nerves down

Aziraphale

No, no. I was just thinking how you're a living checklist of My Type.

oh? into bad boys, are ya?

Aziraphale

Tragically, chronically so.



Crowley bit his lip and considered how to reply. Aziraphale's question in the tent that morning had been running spirited laps in his head all day. *“Is it too forward of me at this point to ask if you need to be put in your place?”* Fuck, that had nearly knocked the breath out of him. He took a calculated risk...

< Aziraphale 

Today•8:54 PM

you rather i be a good boy?

Aziraphale is typing...



Then the three dots disappeared for a long moment, reappeared briefly, then disappeared again. Crowley worried his lip for a moment and fidgeted nervously.

Was that too far? Surely not. Aziraphale had said earlier—maybe he was joking, though?

'Is it too forward of me at this point to ask if you need to be put in your place?'

Those goddamn dots reappeared and disappeared once more. *Is he typing a fucking novel?*

Finally, to Crowley's great relief, the message popped up.

< Aziraphale 

Today•8:54 PM

you rather i be a good boy?

Aziraphale

I can certainly handle a brat, but I'd rather praise you for being my very good boy.



And *wow*, the searing, white-hot spike of arousal that ricocheted through Crowley startled him with its gnawing intensity. He felt like he had a mouthful of desiccant. *Why was his mouth so goddamn dry?* He didn't realize he'd started palming himself through his joggers until he glanced away from his phone. He jerked his hand away with a long-suffering groan. He needed to get laid. It had been too long. Crowley was not meant to subsist on sad shower wanks alone.

He refocused on his phone. *Text the man back, you idiot!*

< Aziraphale 

Today•8:57 PM

asgfdahadgadghhsg

Aziraphale

What?

thats a keysmash angel

Aziraphale

Is that a good thing?

read it like ive lost the ability to type out whole words from horniness

Aziraphale

Ah, so a very good thing.



Crowley snorted. He wasn't sure how Aziraphale managed to maintain his composure, but it was impressive as fuck and kind of a turn on.



Aziraphale



Today•9:03 PM

youre killin me

here lies crowley

killed by the hottest man he'd ever seen

his poor dick exploded

terrible way to go

but at least the poor bastard died doing what he loved

jerking off

Aziraphale

Flatterer.

am not. trutherer

Aziraphale

Consider it payback for writhing against me like a cat in heat this morning. Terrible thing to do to a man.



And wasn't that just too rich coming from the same man who asked if Crowley needed. To. Be. Put. In. His. Fucking. Place. Also, Crowley categorically did not writhe as a policy.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:09 PM

oh youre accusing ME of being a tease?

Aziraphale

It is not merely an accusation, it is a statement of fact. You're the one that made me deal with the mental image of you pleasuring yourself just now.

deal with, eh?

Aziraphale

Taking the matter in hand, as it were.



Woaaaaah, woah, woah. That was unexpected. Aziraphale was chock full of surprises. Crowley cut the rope. Took a leap of faith.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:11 PM

fuckkkkkk. show me? please?

pls pls pls 🙏 angel pls



He wasn't above begging. He was exactly on the level of begging. Crowley and begging were roommates on the same basement floor of desperation.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:12 PM

Aziraphale

Are you trying to goad me into sexting with you?

wow did you really just say sext, didnt expect that angel

Aziraphale

I'm not a complete luddite.

prove it then

Aziraphale is typing...



There went those three little dots, taunting Crowley again. Vanishing and reappearing as if Aziraphale was working very hard to craft a response that was perfectly calculated to tear him apart, set the pieces on fire, and scatter them on the four winds.

The much-anticipated response, however, was devastatingly succinct.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:15 PM

Aziraphale

Only because you begged so nicely.



And then the picture followed.

“Fuck!”

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:16 PM

Aziraphale



fuck!



Crowley scrambled to divest himself of his joggers and ratty 5k race t-shirt from 2011 and haphazardly arranged his sheets just enough to not look like he was the type of guy who never made his bed (he was exactly that type of guy).

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:17 PM

you have such a gorgeous fucking cock angel

god i hope you're a top

and tbh, even if not, i'd pay money to suck you off and thank you for the opportunity

also wtf angel, that picture, how did you even? did someone take that for you?



He sat back against his headboard with pillows shoved behind his low back—too old now to be raw dogging the angle between the headboard and mattress. He opened his camera app, got jump scared by his own face before switching quickly to the rear camera, and began artfully arranging his body for a dick pic. How much chest to include? Take the boxers off or just pull over the waistband? Legs straight out? No, that looked weirdly reminiscent of a corpse on a mortuary table. Legs artfully skewed, one knee bent and fallen off to the side. Perfect.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:18 PM

Aziraphale

You have such a colorful way with words, my dear.

And no, no one took the picture for me. I used a phone tripod and the camera timer, do try to keep up, my dear.

lmao, youre settin an impossibly high standard for dick pics here



Crowley ended up taking forty-three pictures, which made an embarrassing streak of cock in his camera roll. He mercilessly culled the obvious rejects, narrowed the choices down to the two best, picked one of those at random, and hit Send.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:25 PM



Aziraphale is typing...



Those three dots. Oh god here we go again.

And here was the thing: Crowley knew what he looked like. Yeah, sure, he was some middle-aged dude, but he had kept himself up. He even *moisturized*. He had a fair few more silvers in his hair than even just a year ago, but he thought he wore his age pretty well. He'd never had confidence issues for appearance reasons (every other reason, indiscriminately, just not that).

But suddenly, as if his entire lifetime of emotional detachment had been a dam waiting to burst, in this one moment, he felt terribly, hauntingly insecure. Like Aziraphale's opinion of that picture, of *him*, was the only thing that had ever or would ever matter. Like it was the axis that his whole, stupid, strung-out little heart had spun itself around without his permission.

He felt exposed. Not just dick-out exposed, but soul exposed. It made him want to run and stay and beg and vanish, all at once.

And it was kind of a sucker punch to the fucking gut. He *cared what Aziraphale thought*. Desperately. He cared what Aziraphale thought of a picture of his cock, no less. And he was worried that he wouldn't—

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:26 PM

Aziraphale

God, you are like a dream. You're beautiful. I don't think words can really do justice to you.

But I will try.

I've never met anyone quite like you. The way you move is so graceful that I wondered at first if you'd been a dancer. And when you were on top of me this morning and I got to touch you, your body felt like mortal sin made flesh. If it weren't for our friends just outside the tent, I would have fucked you until you forgot your own name.

holy shit angel



How was *that* for a confidence boost?

Crowley had jerked off to a lot of things in his life (Sears catalogs, that one meme with the clingy girlfriend, character concept art from Final Fantasy VII...), but this? A piece of fucking literature written about his hotness? This was a first. He was certain he could never respond to that with any words that would do the sentiment justice, so he made a snap decision to film himself. He hit Record on his phone and took his cock in hand.

"Fffuck," he groaned and let his head loll back, hoping the camera was still pointed in the right direction.

"Angel, nobody—*ah*—nobody's ever s-said anything like that to me, *holy shit*." If he had imagined Aziraphale sexting before, it definitely would not have been in the vein of '*hey bb u wan sum fuk?*' but at the same time, he was not at all prepared for fucking poetry. Why was it so hot?

His phone pinged. Crowley gathered his wits long enough to tip the screen forward and check his messages.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:30 PM

Aziraphale

Are you still touching yourself right now?

yed

yes

Aziraphale

Good boy. Keep going. Tell me what it feels like.



“Oh-ohhh, ohmygod,” Crowley mumbled, reduced temporarily to incoherence at the ‘good boy’ nuke Aziraphale just weaponized against him.

He hoped it would be clear that the typos were the result of a desperate, one-handed effort.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:32 PM

so good anhel cant stanbd it

fyck wish it ww as you

Aziraphale

Tomorrow, my dear. For now, imagine we’re back in the tent this morning, but we are alone. I’m free to do whatever I want to you, and you’re so desperate.



And imagine he did. He closed his eyes and took himself back to the beginning of the day.

Waking up with Aziraphale cuddled up against his back, holding Crowley in place with an arm around his waist. Aziraphale’s mouth is against that devastating spot on his neck, marking up a trail of nips and wet kisses. No one else but them out in those woods. It’s frigid outside, but the inside of that sleeping bag is almost too hot. Aziraphale’s hips and his half-hard cock are grinding into Crowley’s ass. “You don’t need to keep quiet,” Aziraphale murmurs against his ear, breath hot. “Let me hear how much you want it.” Aziraphale leans over a little more, just enough to suck on his earlobe, then whispers, “You’re so desperate, aren’t you?”

Real Life Crowley and Fantasy Crowley groaned at the same time.

“Fuck, yes, so desperate for you, please, fuck,” both Crowleys pleaded.

Real Life Crowley fumbled through another quick text message. He didn't want Aziraphale to think he'd been abandoned.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:40 PM

fuckkkkkk i wantef yo u to fuck mme

Aziraphale

I know you did. And if the circumstances had been different, I would have taken you apart, sweet thing.



Sweet. Thing. Fantasy Crowley melts at the pet name, begins openly begging, “Fuck, please, I need you to fuck me right now. Off, off, off!” and loops his fingers into the waistband of his sleep pants to pull them down just over his ass, enough for access. Fantasy Aziraphale conveniently already has his pants off and even more conveniently, has lube (it was Crowley’s fantasy, fuck off). Crowley feels the press of Aziraphale’s cock against his hole, just a tease.

Real Life Crowley openly moaned, “Oh fuck, ‘Ziraphale, m’gonna—”

He at least had the presence of mind to send one last message before he lost the ability to type entirely.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:45 PM

sso close .

Aziraphale

Come for me, sweetheart.



And that did it. T.K.O. Crowley went down for the count, *hard*, and wasn't getting back up. He came with a long, stuttered groan, making a mess of his hand and his thigh and probably the bed sheets, too. But fuck it, that's why washing machines were invented, probably.

He stopped the recording and then spent several minutes blissfully boneless, slumped to one side, covered in rapidly cooling cum, and trying to remember how to breathe while the twitchy little aftershocks coursed through his body. And there it was again, that gentle, wretched ache in his chest that whispered: *you're fucked, you're so fucked, you're in it now.*

He was only roused from his delirious, cotton-brained fatigue by a *ding!* from his phone.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:55 PM

Aziraphale

I will take your silence to mean success.



Crowley dropped the video evidence in a text and tapped Send before he could think too hard about it, post-nut clarity being what it is (one of Crowley's oldest and toughest foes). He tapped out a glowing review of the experience while he stumbled out of bed with wobbly legs like a newborn baby deer to find a towel for cleanup.

< Aziraphale 

Today•9:55 PM

five stars, 13/10, absolutely would jerk again, a++++ FAST SHIPPING AND EXCELLENT COMMUNICATION

Aziraphale

I have no idea what the last part of that means, but I'm glad you're happy. Should I watch this video you sent now?

pls do



Crowley set about stripping his bedsheets and remaking the bed while he waited for Aziraphale to return. He didn't have any spare clean sheets, so the bare mattress and the duvet would have to do. Once he settled back into his slightly more sparse bed, he checked his messages again.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 10:06 PM

Aziraphale

Oh good Lord.

yeah? good?

Aziraphale

Is this the point at which a key smash would be appropriate?

yah

Aziraphale

asdghjklzxcvbnm



They talked for another hour about not much at all, before Crowley finally fell asleep, phone in hand and messaging app open with Aziraphale's text chain pulled up.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 11:18 PM

Aziraphale

Goodnight my dear. Sleep well and I'll see you in the morning.



[crowley_interview_session3_finalfinalFINAL.mp4]

“So you said there are different types of climbing earlier. Just for my edification, do you mind explaining them? There is a lot of terminology that I’m not familiar with,” Aziraphale explained, hoping for some good sound bites if he could get Crowley to monologue about the sport for a bit.

Crowley looked up in thought and ruffled his hair, “Yeah—yeah so... there’s a few ways to climb—well, a lot of ways—but the stuff you commonly hear about is sport climbing, that’s the kind most people do where the rock has bolts already drilled in it and the climber uses a rope and has another person on the ground belaying them, taking their weight if they fall and managing the rope. There’s also trad climbing, that’s a bit more advanced, when the rock isn’t pre-bolted and the climber is placing their own protection as they climb, but there’s still a rope. Then there’s free solo climbing. That’s when you just climb the rock and try not to fall, no rope, no anchors.”

“Anchors are the bolts?”

“Or whatever else the climber uses to attach to the rock, yeah. Sometimes they’re spring loaded cams that you slip between rocks and expand so they lock in place.” Crowley mimed the spring action with his hands as he spoke. “Sometimes they’re just wedges of metal—pitons—that you hammer straight into the rock, sometimes they’re nuts or hexes that you wedge into a crack.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? Can’t they slip back out?”

“Well, if you’re already climbing rocks, I think you’ve committed to a certain level of danger from the get go,” Crowley grinned. “But in general, no, if you make sure your gear is in good condition and know how to use it, they’re pretty damn safe. Climbers and the folks that design climbing gear are real serious about making sure whatever they use is as foolproof as possible. But I mean, there’s always a chance, ya know?”

“Sure, that makes sense,” Aziraphale agreed and checked his packet of papers for the next question.

Crowley, however, continued, “There’s a thing called the American Death Triangle.”

Hold up, pause shuffling papers. “That sounds ominous,” Aziraphale prompted.

“Yeah, aptly fuckin’ named,” Crowley agreed and motioned to Aziraphale for his paper, “give me a sheet and a pen and I’ll show ya.”

The tip of Crowley’s tongue peeked out when he concentrated and Aziraphale found that terribly endearing. Crowley scribbled quickly on the sheet and then held it up.

“So the Death Triangle is when you have two climbing anchors side-by-side, like this... or something like it, up above you, that you’re clipped into. So the rope goes from the climber, up to the first anchor, across to the second anchor, and back down to the climber.”

He sketched out the triangle with his finger on the paper before continuing.

“These two anchors, plus the climber below, make an upside-down triangle. It seems like two anchors mean better protection, right?” Crowley glanced at Aziraphale, who nodded his understanding.

“But in this case,” Crowley continued, “the force on each anchor is actually magnified by the other anchor, ‘cause... physics. Vector analysis of force or whatever. So if the climber falls, the protection

system is suddenly, violently taking way more load than intended, and the system fails.”

Aziraphale was a little stunned at Crowley’s casual description of the vector analysis of force “or whatever,” but tried not to let on.

“This kills the climber,” Crowley said with a grim finality and crumpled the paper in his fist, tossing it over his shoulder. “So anchors are important, but you gotta do them right.”

Here are the illustrations for this chapter in full size.





Chapter End Notes

While the American Death Triangle is certainly not an ideal means to rig climbing protection, it's probably worth mentioning that it also is not necessarily a death sentence every time. Crowley is being dramatic for effect. [Disk horse in recent years about the American Death Triangle has slightly softened some of the criticism that it used to receive.](#) Still, I sure as shit would not trust my life to something with risks like that if there was any other alternative available.

 **Join us on the [Belayed Gratification Discord Server](#)** for wild theories and speculation, pictures of rocks, an archive of the illustrations for this story, notices of fic updates, and silly conversation with other weirdos and degenerates, because that is absolutely a thing that we all needed.

Also catch me on:

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Dyno

Chapter Summary

The weekend long fuckfest begins.

Chapter Notes

 Content warning: Daddy kink. Obviously.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The next morning, Aziraphale woke before sunrise. It was insultingly early. The type of early that felt like an affront to modern sensibilities. But he couldn't help it, despite the bone-deep weariness that lingered from the camping trip. He'd barely slept, and not for lack of trying—he'd flopped around for hours like a landed trout, heart tripping every time his mind drifted toward the same alluring image: Anthony Just-A-J Crowley, the most stunning man in the world, in his house. In his bed.

To fuck.

Well, to eat waffles, too, but Aziraphale wasn't delusional enough to believe that the breakfast foods were anything other than pretext. He had not, as the kids said, *risen and ground* for the sake of maple syrup alone.

He sat up in his bed with a groan and ran both hands through his hair, which had conspired overnight to form a frizzy mass that would undoubtedly need serious attention before he tried to impress anyone. He blinked blearily at the ceiling and took a moment to contemplate the recklessness of what he was doing.

Aziraphale was not a casual sex kind of person, normally. In his twenties? Absolutely, with great abandon. He'd tried every flavor on the menu, and a few off of it. But for the past decade or so, he'd only had sex within the confines of relationships, and only after a deliberate emotional build-up that resembled courtship more than anything else.

For Crowley, though, he was willing to make an exception. That's not to say that he wasn't wildly, ravenously interested in having a relationship with him, but rather that Aziraphale was trying to remain realistic about his prospects with a man who, by his own admission, was not into long-term commitments. And Aziraphale, for all his faults, *did* listen. He was trying to be realistic. Grounded. Sensible.

Which was fine, really. Aziraphale would take what he could get. It wasn't often that a guy who looked like *that* and was hilarious and skilled at what he does and far sweeter than he let on showed a genuine interest. So Aziraphale was prepared to pull out all the stops and see where things went.

After waking up, he spent an hour or so panic cleaning his house, though truthfully, he kept a pretty neat place already. He doubted Crowley would be the type to check behind the sink faucets for scum, but a little extra effort never hurt.

He had stopped at the grocery store the night before on the way home and picked up breakfast supplies sufficient to stock a hotel breakfast bar, just to be certain he would have anything that Crowley might desire on hand. He had enough ingredients to open a pop-up brunch restaurant. Too much effort? Maybe, but Aziraphale would rather be prepared than caught out.

With the house cleaned to his satisfaction, Aziraphale wiped his hands and took a moment to send off a message to Crowley.

< Crowley 

Today•7:22 AM

Let me know before you head over? I'll start breakfast before you arrive.



The reply was immediate, which made Aziraphale smile. Had Crowley been up early from nerves, too?

< Crowley 

Today•7:23 AM

Crowley

sure thing angel. i'm packing a bag rn and leaving here in like 20. i think you're about 25 mins away from me so i should be there within the hour. i'll shoot you a msg before i leave tho.



'Packing a bag,' he had written. That meant Crowley had been serious about staying over for the night. Aziraphale had not dared to assume. He hadn't wanted to spook him. But now Aziraphale felt a little giddy at the prospect.

< Crowley 

Today•7:24 AM

Thank you, my dear. I'll be in the kitchen, so ring the bell when you get here.

Crowley

you got it



Aziraphale set about his breakfast buffet preparations with a light heart and silly daydreams. Crowley balled up next to him on the couch, touching shoulder-to-shoulder, watching terrible television together and yelling at the characters. Crowley out on the back patio with him in summer, talking nonsense about the hot weather while Aziraphale admired those sun kissed shoulders and a bead of sweat that rolled down that absurd swan-like neck. Crowley in his bed early in the morning, red hair a rats' nest, eyes half-lidded, languid and sleepy but demanding affection. Crowley in his bed late at night, neither languid nor sleepy, lips kissed swollen red and demanding Aziraphale's mouth and his hands and...

The doorbell rang.

Aziraphale startled so hard he knocked over the spatula. There was no way that almost an hour had passed, right? Aziraphale checked his phone messages and saw the notification from Crowley—*twenty-five minutes ago?!*



Today • 7:45 AM

Crowley

omw angel, see you soon



Aziraphale hastily washed his hands, pulled his apron off at a frenetic pace, and rushed to the front door. He put his hand on the doorknob, took a quick breath, and schooled his features, then opened up to greet Crowley.

“Heya, Angel,” Crowley said with that fucking devastating crooked little grin sloping across his unfairly handsome face. He was wearing a black shirt that looked too soft for words and clung lovingly to his lean frame. His sunglasses were perched on top of his head, keeping his hair back, which made his eyes all-too-visible and somehow worse to behold, like being stared at by a very sexy hawk that wanted you for breakfast.

Aziraphale's mouth went dry. All that time spent composing texts and fussing with lemon-scented wood polish, and now he couldn't quite remember how doors worked, for some reason. He stepped aside automatically, heart thudding, as Crowley slid past him with that sinuous ease of a serpent who knew how good his scales looked in sunlight. The scent of him—clean sweat, faint soap, something vegetal and sharp like nettle—lingered as he passed. Aziraphale fought the impulse to sniff again like a bloodhound and mentally slapped himself.

Aziraphale knew in that moment that, for all his preparations, he was leaping into the unknown. And he kind of liked the feeling.

Crowley was lingering on the event horizon of his first hookup in a long, long while, and he was ready to be spaghettified.

He had spent the morning in a near panic, hovering around his room, caught in decision paralysis, trying to work out how many things would be *too many things* to bring in an overnight bag. He had taken two showers, one extremely hot and one extremely cold. He had ironed his socks and felt ridiculous the entire time. He had checked his text messages like he was waiting on his dealer to get back to him about a meet-up.

Fortunately, Aziraphale had the superior presence of mind to text first and inadvertently saved Crowley from a crisis.

< Aziraphale 

Today•7:22 AM

Aziraphale

Let me know before you head over? I'll start breakfast before you arrive.



The notification sound damn near caused him to drop his phone in his hurry to reply.

< Aziraphale 

Today•7:23 AM

sure thing angel. i'm packing a bag rn and leaving here in like 20. i think you're about 25 mins away from me so i should be there within the hour. i'll shoot you a msg before i leave tho.



He doesn't need that level of detail, you moron.

Truthfully, his bag had been packed for well over an hour. He just didn't want to seem like he was too eager (he was, in fact, too eager). So instead, he sat cross-legged on his bed amidst the discarded reject items from his packing spree and Googled things like:

How early to arrive for date;

First date at his house;

How to not fuck up first date; and

What to bring to a booty call,

unfortunately he left that incognito tab with more questions than answers. Still, it passed the fifteen minutes he'd intended to wait nicely.

He sent a quick message to Aziraphale, grabbed his keys, and headed out.

The drive to Aziraphale's house had been an exercise in frantic stress management and desperate self-pep talks. He cycled through three different playlists and eventually landed on one that felt like the right level of chill but also sexy but also not too sexy. A difficult line to walk, that. What was the soundtrack of "we're gonna bang, but no pressure"?

He briefly considered stopping to buy flowers, but second-guessed that idea as too romantic—he didn't want to give himself (or Aziraphale? ...maybe himself, too?) the wrong idea. Whatever that was.

He actually did pull into a Starbucks to get coffee, but ended up leaving the drive-through line when he remembered that Aziraphale was making breakfast and would definitely have coffee. Kind of a dick move, walking in with two cups of fucking char-flavored Starbucks bean water when the man was probably slaving away, making some sort of an epicurean masterpiece.

He muttered to himself most of the drive. Little things. Reminders. Don't be weird. Don't talk too much. Don't say anything creepy about his mouth unless it's also sexy. Don't make any dick jokes. Don't say "daddy." Not even as a joke. Not even once.

Twenty-five minutes of intense hair ruffling and muttered curses later, he pulled into Aziraphale's driveway. The house itself wasn't anything special—an older two-story deal with a cute yellow door and shutters to match, a small front yard, neatly kept, and a concrete birdbath filled with frozen rainwater. Aziraphale's car was in the driveway in front of him, which was good. He got the house right. And Aziraphale hadn't changed his mind and decided to leave the country.

The house suited him. It was fussy and endearing and a little too perfect, like a storybook cottage that had learned restraint just before going full Grimm. Crowley stared at the front door a second too long. He couldn't quite believe he was about to walk through it.

Crowley took a deep breath and checked himself in the rear-view mirror, straightening his mess of hair that had suffered mightily from all of the stress-ruffling on the drive over. He considered redoing it completely, right there in the car. Then he immediately panicked that he'd be late. Then he panicked harder that showing up too close to the top of the hour would somehow make him seem calculated. He ended up just patting his hair down again and whispering, "you look fine, shut up" to his own reflection. Once he felt sufficiently calm, which is to say, not hyper-ventilating, he grabbed his overnight bag from the passenger seat and made the approach to Aziraphale's sunny little front door.

He rang the bell once and stepped back, to not seem like some creeper standing weirdly close to the house. *Was that a thing? That sounded like a thing a creep would do.*

What was the protocol here? Hands in pockets? Too casual. Hands folded? Too priestly. Arms crossed? Aggressive. He settled for clasping them behind his back like he was about to be knighted.

He counted the seconds anxiously. One, two, three... and then footfalls. He could hear them, soft and steady on hardwood floors. Crowley's palms went clammy. His heart leapt into his throat and started doing high-impact cardio. He considered fleeing, just for one second. Just a little jog down the street. It would be fine. Aziraphale would understand. Probably.

Moments later, Aziraphale opened the door and looked *just like a fucking angel*. Of course he did. He always did. His hair was mussed in the best possible way—like he'd fussed with it and then given up halfway through. He wore a neat blue button-down that had been rolled to the elbows, and his cheeks were pink from the heat of the kitchen. What made it worse was the adorable smudge of flour across his cheekbone. Crowley wanted to lick it off.

"Heya, Angel."

It came out rougher than he'd intended. Throat-dry and a little too warm. But Aziraphale smiled—wide and luminous and pleased—and Crowley knew with sudden, stomach-dropping certainty that he was in so much trouble.

"Crowley! Come on in, please." Aziraphale smiled a thousand watts and motioned for Crowley to enter.

"Long time no see, eh?" Crowley joked as he stepped in and wiped his feet on the small rug at the entrance. He shucked off his black boots, dropping them and his overnight duffel in the corner, near the pin-straight line of Aziraphale's own shoes.

The hallway smelled like cinnamon and fresh coffee and something floral he couldn't place—maybe Aziraphale's detergent? There was a mirror near the front door and a row of neatly hung coats, a single umbrella in the stand. Everything was so... curated. Crowley felt like a smudge on a perfectly composed photo.

"Far too long," Aziraphale agreed. "Are you hungry or—oh, you don't eat breakfast, so probably not? Well, either way, we have waffles. And... and a lot of other things."

Aziraphale led him excitedly into the quaintest, most adorable kitchen Crowley had ever seen, and presented him with something more akin to a medieval feasting tableau than two guys having breakfast together before they bang it out.

“Woah, Angel, holy shit. Are we expecting a football team, too?” Crowley joked, a little overwhelmed by the effort Aziraphale had put into feeding him. It was equal measures flattering and nerve-wracking.

He ushered Crowley over as if this were the most normal thing in the world. Crowley followed, uncertain what to do with his hands, and settled on hovering just out of the way, watching Aziraphale bustle about in his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, like a house husband or something. Which was—well. Not something Crowley was thinking about, obviously.

He was just... standing there. In a cute little kitchen. With someone who made gourmet fucking waffles for him. It was an entirely new type of disorientation. He wasn't used to morning-after—or morning before—scenarios that involved cloth napkins and fruit salad.

Aziraphale's delighted little smile didn't even falter. “No, no, I just love to bake. And anyway, it looks like a lot, but I rather enjoy leftovers. I figured we would have plenty for later, after—”

“After?” Crowley turned to him and said with a sly smile.

Aziraphale blushed, honest-to-god blushed, pink to his ears, and nodded. “After.”

“Fuck. Right, yeah,” Crowley blew out a breath and ruffled his hair again. *Well, there goes the hair.*

“You can sit, you know. Or get a plate,” Aziraphale said, glancing at him with a half-smile. “You look like you're waiting for a dentist.”

Crowley gave a lopsided grimace. “Tryin' not to knock over your... antique everything.”

“Perhaps we should eat before I have to file an insurance claim, then.”

“Good thinking. Well... where should I start?”

“Oh! Here let me get you a plate, grab anything you want,” Aziraphale bustled over to the counter, pulled a plate out of the drying rack by the sink, and handed it off to Crowley. “I've got coffee going in the pot over there. Mugs are in the cupboard above. Please help yourself.”

“What time did you have to get up to do all this?” Crowley asked as he approached the spread of waffles, cream, fruit, bacon, eggs, some kind of baked good that looked like a scone, jam, and fucking *beverage options*. The orange juice was decanted into an actual glass juice pitcher. It matched the syrup pitcher, like even the condiments had to wear formal attire.

“Oh, this really didn't take very long, and I was up early anyway,” Aziraphale said cheerily and forked a waffle onto his own plate, then started heaping it with fruit.

“Yeah? Sleep okay last night?” Crowley followed suit, then set his plate aside to get at the coffee machine.

“Mm, well enough,” Aziraphale replied as he sat down at the small wood-top breakfast table in an airy, bright nook wrapped by bay windows. Crowley thought he looked gorgeous in the white

morning light; it suited him, that ethereal glow. “I just had too much nervous energy, and it woke me up before dawn.”

“God. Me too,” Crowley grinned, relieved to learn that Aziraphale was just as anxious about this as he was. He poured himself a cup of coffee into a mug that said “WORLD’S GAYEST PERSON” in cheerful rainbow text across the front, took a sip, and nodded his approval.

The mug cupped in his hands felt warm and grounding, which helped, but the absurdity of his whole situation—the chaos of nerves inside his chest and this chipper mug grinning up at him—almost made him laugh.

“Also, uh...” he continued as he slipped into the bench seat across from Aziraphale. “S’probably worth sayin’ that we don’t have to immediately or—or anything. Or like, at all, if you don’t wanna. I mean, I’d like to! But no pressure, yaknow? M’not—I’m also good to just spend time together. If- if that’s what you want.”

He didn’t want Aziraphale to think that he was just there for—well, now, wait a minute. Wasn’t that exactly what he was there for? Or not *only* that. He’d kind of lost the thread on things at some point. *Fuck, maybe he was listening to Nat too much.*

“You’re sweet, but I would very much like to finish what we started yesterday, if you’re amenable,” Aziraphale said with this coy look that made Crowley’s pulse jump in a way that he wasn’t prepared to handle before nine in the morning.

“I’m amenable!” He blurted. Maybe too quickly. “That’s me. Sooooo amenable.”

“Perhaps not directly after we’ve eaten, but I’m in no rush,” Aziraphale shrugged with a nonchalance that Crowley suspected he was feigning, and resumed cutting into his waffle.

“Yeah, totally. No rush. We’ve got all day.”

“And night,” Aziraphale added with the most devious little smile. Crowley’s belly did cartwheels.

“And night,” he readily agreed and tried to wrest control of his nerves again.

Aziraphale made great pains to load his fork up with the ideal first bite of waffle, fruit, and cream, which Crowley spectated with mounting amusement.

“I can’t believe you made all this.”

“Is that so hard to believe?” Aziraphale asked, taking his bite and... moaning? *Oh, fuck.*

Crowley spluttered, coughed, and tried to keep the conversation on track. “Y-yeah. A bit. Thought you’d like... summon a pastry cart and demand a footman.”

“Oh, hush.” Aziraphale took a sip of his juice, and for a minute they ate in silence. The waffles really were annoyingly good. Crowley took a bite and tried not to make a noise about it himself—*well, that explains the moaning at least.*

“You cook often?” Crowley asked finally, reaching for more syrup.

“When I have the time. It’s... grounding.” Aziraphale looked pleased. “Do you?”

Crowley snorted. “Not unless ‘dumping ramen into a pot and forgetting about it’ counts as culinary excellence.”

“That explains a great deal,” Aziraphale said with a smile.

There was a pause, just long enough for the air to charge with something heavier. Their eyes met over coffee cups, and Crowley’s mouth went a little dry.

“So,” he said. “You usually invite documentary subjects over for waffles? Or am I just special?”

Aziraphale set his glass down carefully. “You’re certainly *something*.”

Crowley raised an eyebrow. “Something good?”

“That remains to be seen,” Aziraphale said, with infuriating composure.

Crowley grinned, his foot brushing Aziraphale’s under the table. “Guess I’ll just have to earn my second waffle.”

Aziraphale’s gaze lingered on him a beat too long, cheeks spotted pink, then he stood abruptly. “More coffee?”

After breakfast, Aziraphale took Crowley on a tour of his house, aside from the master bedroom by mutual agreement that it was best to not open that can of worms while they were both stuffed to the brim with waffles. They did, however, land in the spare bedroom, which Aziraphale had converted into a cozy little library, shelved wall-to-wall and packed with books.

It smelled faintly of old paper and lemon wood polish. The walls were warm cream, and there was an large, red oriental rug anchoring the leather armchair and the grand chesterfield sofa. Crowley turned slowly, taking it in. It was personal in a way that made his chest ache. Books were stacked in piles that hadn’t been reshelfed yet. A feather used as a bookmark, tucked inside a copy of some title Crowley had never heard of. A crooked frame on the fireplace mantle holding a slightly faded old print of some Renaissance painting Crowley couldn’t name. The room had clearly been built by love over time.

“Wow, Angel, look at you. Read much?” Crowley asked as he walked to the center of the room and turned a circle, taking in the collection.

“Some,” Aziraphale admitted as he busied himself clearing a space on the sofa.

“What’s your favorite?”

Aziraphale froze on the spot with a stack of books in hand. “Oh god. You can’t just ask me that!”

“Okay, top three?”

Aziraphale set the books aside. “Erm.” He wrung his hands nervously and looked around at his shelves as if he was afraid to offend the books.

“Top... five? Ten?” Crowley tried.

“Well, I...”

“You’re so fuckin’ cute.”

“You can’t expect me to choose!”

“S’pose not. Are we hanging out in here?” Crowley asked and flopped out on the chesterfield sofa.

“If you’d like. I do spend a good deal of time in here when I’m home. It’s my favorite room in the house.”

“Then it’s my favorite, too,” Crowley agreed and settled deeper into his spot, crossing his arms behind his head. Aziraphale seemed pleased by his approval, and Crowley was rather proud of himself for getting it right.

“Have you read all these?” Crowley asked and waved a hand around at the shelves.

“Most of them.”

“Wow.” Crowley was pretty sure he could count the number of books he’d willingly read after high school on both hands.

“I collect some, too, of course,” Aziraphale added and motioned to a pair of barrister’s bookcases in the corner as he consolidated another pile of books at his feet.

“Right. Like that Gutenberg bible I’m gonna buy you,” Crowley grinned.

“Precisely. It would be a fine addition to my collection. I could give it a place of honor. Perhaps a pedestal with a glass case around it,” Aziraphale returned his smile and Crowley felt like a kid again, talking to his crush.

“And some fancy lighting, too. And probably an alarm system with pressure sensors and lasers.”

“Yes, I’d imagine I’ll need to deter the high end book thieves.”

“Now you’re thinkin’.” Crowley tapped his temple.

Aziraphale asked, “Do you read much?”

“Honestly? No. I like graphic novels okay, but letters are kinda swimmy to me, so it’s frustrating. I can get down with an audio book, though.”

“I’d love to read to you.”

Crowley was surprised by that. He’d not had anyone offer to read to him since he was a little kid.

“Yeah?”

“Of course.”

“I’d like that. Do you do the voices and everything?”

Aziraphale laughed at that. “For you, my dear, I am willing to make the effort. What would you like to hear?”

“Anything. Like your voice.”

“Do you?” Aziraphale sounded genuinely surprised.

“Yeah. First time I called you, when I was apologizing for being a dick about the interview?”

Crowley kind of regretted bringing that up again, but he’d never been accused of tact. “I heard your voice on the other end of the line and had a gay panic.”

“You were very sweet.”

Crowley huffed. “Was not.”

“You were.”

“Hmmp. Pick a book, Angel.”

“Alright, alright,” Aziraphale conceded and rifled through the stack of books on a small side table next to what Crowley assumed was his usual armchair. “How about *Around the World in Eighty Days*?”

“Jules Verne, I like it. Hit it, Angel!”

Aziraphale muttered his agreement and started to sit in his armchair, but Crowley protested.

“No no no. Sit over here. With me. Please?” He asked and scooted up to make space on the sofa, which Aziraphale took. Crowley laid back out with his head on Aziraphale’s thigh.

It was a bold move, maybe bolder than he'd meant, but Aziraphale didn't flinch—just adjusted slightly so Crowley fit comfortably. His thigh was warm and soft. Crowley shifted once to get the angle right, then forced himself to be still. He didn’t trust his hips not to say something his mouth wouldn’t.

“Alright. Chapter one. Mister Phileas Fogg—”

“Weird name.”

“Oh, no.” Aziraphale stared down at him with a look that reminded Crowley very much of a disappointed teacher about to send him to the principal’s office. “Are you going to be doing this the whole time?”

“Giving insightful commentary? Yes,” Crowley grinned upward, unapologetic in his mischief.

Aziraphale sighed, but continued anyway. “Mister Phileas Fogg lived, in eighteen seventy-two, at number seven Savile Row, Burlington Gardens, the house in which Sheridan died in eighteen fourteen. He was one of the most noticeable members of the Reform Club, though he seemed always to avoid attracting attention; an enigmatical personage, about whom little was known—”

“Goals,” Crowley chirped.

“—except that he was a polished man of the world.”

“Very goals.”

Aziraphale cleared his throat and carried on, irrespective of Crowley’s interruptions. “People said that he resembled Byron—at least that his head was Byronic; but he was a bearded, tranquil Byron, who might live a thousand years without growing old.”

“Wasn’t Byron hot?” Crowley asked. He swore he could remember some painting of Byron that made him look like a snack.

“Mm, I think so?”

Crowley pulled out his phone to Google Byron and brought up a portrait to show to Aziraphale.

“Quite the looker, wasn’t he?” Aziraphale asked.

“Mmhm,” Crowley agreed. “Little nuts though.”

“Well, we can’t all be perfect.”

Crowley laughed at that and motioned for Aziraphale to continue.

They worked their way through the first chapter in the same fashion, with Crowley making remarks and Aziraphale being fondly irritated at the interruptions.

Crowley basked in the warmth of Aziraphale’s leg under his cheek and the low drone of his voice recounting the tale of Mister Fogg and his eighty day dick waving contest. He could smell Aziraphale’s cologne now, faint and woodsy and a little sweet, like vanilla. The smell of someone who owned hardcover dictionaries and glass-front bookcases with display lighting. His body relaxed slowly, uncoiling one muscle at a time. He didn’t realize how tightly wound he’d been until his shoulders stopped aching.

At some point, Aziraphale’s free hand began tracing nonsense patterns onto Crowley’s palm, which made him feel all sorts of giddy. By the time they finished the first chapter and Aziraphale was marking their spot and setting the book aside, Crowley was feeling antsy. Not because he was uncomfortable—but because this felt far too good and far too easy. He wanted to climb into Aziraphale’s lap and be kissed within an inch of his life.

“I’m very glad you came over today,” Aziraphale said first, before Crowley could make a move to do anything with his antsiness.

“Me too,” he agreed and smiled up at Aziraphale, who tentatively reached out to card his fingers through Crowley’s hair.

“This red hair of yours is so stunning,” he said and tugged softly on a handful of strands.

“Y’think so?”

“Mmhm. It’s lovely. Suits you,” Aziraphale said and dragged his fingers through Crowley’s locks once again, scraping just a bit at his scalp on the way. And that—*oh god*—that sent a delicious shiver right down Crowley’s spine.

He tapped at Aziraphale’s leg to let him up. Aziraphale complied but gave him a questioning look, to which Crowley grinned as he sat up and turned himself around on the couch.

Crowley swung his leg over Aziraphale’s lap and settled across his thighs. He snaked his arms around his neck and leaned in close. Aziraphale placed his hands on Crowley’s waist and made small circles there with his fingertips. Crowley shivered.



“Wanna kiss you again, 'kay?” he asked quietly.

“I’d like that.”

“Kay,” Crowley whispered with a small nod and tilted in closer.

Kiss number five was slow and syrupy, thick with heat and want, a molten slide of lips and tongue that made Crowley feel like his bones had gone soft. It was starfire-hot and maddeningly tender, every pass of Aziraphale’s mouth over his sending sparks darting down his spine. Crowley’s fingers slipped into the soft curls at the nape of Aziraphale’s neck, gently tugging—earning a breathy sound that lit him up inside.

Aziraphale’s hands wandered with aimless reverence, skating over the dip of Crowley’s waist, the curve of his hips, the small of his back. His touch was exploratory and affectionate, like he was learning Crowley by heart through his fingertips. Crowley shivered under the worship, letting his body melt into the touch, breath huffing out softly through his nose.

When they parted for a breath, Crowley sighed. “Fuck, you’re good at that.”

“As are you,” Aziraphale said with a smile that made Crowley want to eat him alive.

“Go again?”

“Please.”

Crowley dove back in with the same meandering pace as before, but this time one of Aziraphale’s hands slid under the back of his shirt, while the other stroked up his stomach, over his chest, up his neck, and finally caught under his chin. Aziraphale nudged there to tilt Crowley’s head back and to the side, then trailed his lips down to a spot below his ear that made his head swim.

“Oh, fffffuck, Angel, that’s—that’s good. Do that. Do that and never stop, please,” Crowley begged, and Aziraphale humored him by nipping at his sensitized skin and then soothing it with a kiss or a lick, over and over again.

“Hmm. You’re so polite when you’re like this.”

“I can be way less polite if you want.”

“No, no. Like I said, I’d much prefer to praise you for being such a good boy for me.”

“Hnnngk.” The way that pet name made Crowley’s stomach swoop like the floor had just fallen out from underneath him probably merited further examination when he had the brain cells to spare.

“Do you like that?” Aziraphale asked as he gently tilted Crowley’s head again and began marking up his neck on the other side. “Being my good boy?”

“Yes, fuck, oh—there again, please—oh, God, yeah, m’your good boy.”

Crowley’s eyes slipped closed, and he leaned back into the grip Aziraphale had around his waist, content to be ravished. Aziraphale kissed underneath his jaw, pulled on his earlobe with his teeth, and sucked a pink mark right over his pulse point.

“This’s gotta be like a half step away from me calling you Daddy, right?” Crowley slurred as Aziraphale withdrew one hand from his waist to pull down the neck of his henley and mouth at his collarbones.

“Do you want to?” Aziraphale murmured into his fever-hot skin.

“Oh god. Let’s uh... let’s maybe hold off on the kink the first couple times, but I mean...” Crowley trailed off, but Aziraphale picked it back up.

“But you mean... that you’ll eventually want Daddy to take care of you and tell you what a perfect, precious boy you are?”

Crowley’s hips hitched involuntarily. “Fuck, yes, please.”

“We can keep it simple, for now.”

“Mmhm,” Crowley agreed and tipped forward to center his weight in Aziraphale’s lap again. Aziraphale settled back against the couch and gazed up at him as his fingers teased the waistband of Crowley’s jeans.

“Do you want to move this elsewhere?”

“Nuh uh. M’good right here,” Crowley said with a little shake of his head and brought his hands up to cup Aziraphale’s face. “Wanna... just like this. Please?”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Crowley repeated and leaned in to kiss Aziraphale again, this time rolling his hips forward in a slow, filthy grind that ripped groans from both of them.

“Oh, sweetheart, like that, that’s it,” Aziraphale panted against his mouth.

“Mmnnh. Love it when you call me that.”

“Sweetheart?”

“Yeah. Love it.”

Aziraphale’s hands moved down to clutch at Crowley’s ass, pulling their bodies tight together and encouraging him to roll his hips again. Crowley took the hint and ground down again, once, twice, then picked up a rhythm.

“Ah. I don’t think this will—*Oh!* ...Take much. For me,” Aziraphale admitted.

“S’okay. Me neither. Been wantin’ this so bad. Fuck, ‘Ziraphale.”

“Good Lord, it’ll take even less time if you keep saying my name like that.”

Crowley laughed breathlessly, then summoned up some proper pornstar energy to moan, long and loud, “Feels soooo good, ‘Ziraphale, yeah, like that, please!”

“You’re filthy.”

“You like it.”

“I do.”

Crowley was openly panting, barely coherent, and beginning to feel frantic in his movements as he chased the friction between his cock and Aziraphale’s belly.

“Oh. Oh, m’gonna...” He squeezed his eyes shut and his mouth went slack. The tension building between his hips ramped up and up and up and...

“That’s it, don’t stop. Almost there, sweet thing,” Aziraphale encouraged, before sucking another mark into Crowley’s neck.

Crowley’s hips stuttered in their movements as his entire body drew up taut. He arched his back, clawed desperately at Aziraphale’s shoulders, and moaned with the orgasm that shuddered through him.

“Oh, good boy. You did so well for me,” Aziraphale praised.

Crowley slumped forward and buried his face in the crook of Aziraphale’s neck and shoulder. That was quickly becoming his favorite spot in the world. He tried to even out his ragged breaths and his racing heart but Aziraphale wasn’t making it easy—not with the way he held him so securely, hands soothing along the dip of his back and the swell of his ass like he never wanted to let go. Crowley let himself melt into that warmth, boneless and dizzy and utterly undone.

“Better?” Aziraphale asked softly and stroked Crowley’s hair.

“Mmmhm. So good,” Crowley sighed and smiled sleepily against Aziraphale’s skin.

Aziraphale kissed the crown of his head—soft and reverent—then again, and again, until Crowley’s body shivered from the overstimulation and the affection alike.

“You’re extraordinary,” Aziraphale murmured into his hair, like a secret, like a prayer.

Crowley made a noise that was somewhere between a groan and a laugh and pressed closer. “I’m a mess.”

“Perhaps, but you’re perfect like this. Flushed and trembling and wrecked.”

Crowley whimpered, embarrassed but thrilled, and clutched tighter at the fabric of Aziraphale’s shirt. He could still feel the faint pulse of aftershocks zinging along his nerves, but beneath that—lower and darker—was the awareness of Aziraphale’s cock still pressing firm beneath him, untouched.

“We should get you cleaned up, my dear,” Aziraphale said.

“Nuh uh. Gotta help you out first,” Crowley protested weakly. “Jusss need a minute.”

“You don’t have to. I’m just fine. I was enjoying the view.”

“Oh no no, if you think I’m missing out on the chance to see your O face, you’ve got another thing comin’,” Crowley insisted from his boneless slouch.

Aziraphale’s laugh rumbled through his chest, and Crowley decided he loved that feeling. “Very well. But take your time, sweetheart. I’m in no hurry.”

“Mmmnh, well that makes one of us,” Crowley said as he moved his hands to fumble weakly at Aziraphale’s belt buckle. But Aziraphale shook his head and caught his wrist gently, guiding it back to his chest.

“Not just yet,” he said, low and indulgent. “I like you like this. Loose. Drowsy. All ruined and soft for me.”

Crowley bit his lip, his whole body twitching with how much he liked being spoken to that way, and hated how much he liked it, and liked that he hated it. “You keep saying things like that and m’gonna end up blowing a fucking fuse.”

“Mm. Good,” Aziraphale purred. “Then I’ll know I’ve done it right.”

He leaned in again, one hand drifting up to cradle Crowley’s jaw, thumb brushing delicately at the flush on his cheek. Crowley turned into the touch instinctively, almost nuzzling like some lazy cat in a sunbeam, completely overwhelmed by how good it felt to be touched like that. Like he was precious. Like he was wanted.

When their mouths met again, it was slower than before, molten and possessive, a kiss that tasted of honeyed sin. Aziraphale deepened it with a hum, tilting Crowley just enough to press him further into his lap. The drag of his arousal beneath them made Crowley’s breath catch.

“Can I?” Crowley murmured against his mouth, fingers at Aziraphale’s waistband. He felt so dizzy and needy that he couldn’t quite get his hands to work in coordination. “Please? Wanna feel you.”

Aziraphale took pity on his struggle and batted his hands away to make quick work of the belt, button, and zipper on his trousers.

“There. Happy?” Aziraphale asked.

Crowley sat up to look him in the eye, now seemingly much more lucid. “Very.”

Crowley snaked one hand between their bodies and dipped into Aziraphale’s waistband to cup his cock over his underwear. Aziraphale groaned in relief and let his eyes fall shut.

“Made me come so hard, Angel,” Crowley muttered as he stroked a little more firmly, wrapping his fingers around Aziraphale’s girth as best he could from the awkward angle.

“Mm, you were—oh, yes, that—you were beautiful like that. You *are* beautiful,” Aziraphale gasped as Crowley twisted his wrist.

“Y’know what I want?” Crowley leaned in a little closer, letting his breath fan across the skin of Aziraphale’s neck.

“W-what?” Aziraphale asked, small and breathless and shivering in anticipation.

Crowley dipped in to kitten lick underneath his jaw. “Wanna suck you off. So, so bad.”

Aziraphale groaned and Crowley felt his arms flex and tense around him.

“Only if—if you want, I—”

“I want,” Crowley reassured him as he slunk off his lap and slid to the floor, onto his knees. Aziraphale looked down at him with such plain and obvious reverence that Crowley almost felt bad to ruin the moment by swallowing his dick. Almost.

“ I have—in the... In the...” Aziraphale waved a hand toward somewhere, but Crowley was a step ahead of him.

“You have what?” He grinned, wide and proud, and reached behind himself to dip a hand into his back pocket and retrieve the condom that he’d very hopefully put there that morning. “One of these?”

Aziraphale laughed in a breathy gust of relief. “Yes. One of those.”

Crowley held his gaze as he traced the clothed length of Aziraphale’s cock with his fingers, then tugged down Aziraphale’s clothes just enough to free his erection, and *oh, Christ, it’s even better in person.*

“ Angel, you’ll be lucky if I let you ever put clothes back on,” Crowley said with a smirk as he lightly wrapped his hand around the shaft and gave a few tortuously slow strokes before he tore open the foil packet and rolled the condom on him.

“That could become problematic as the documentary go—*Oh !*”

Crowley dipped forward and licked from base to tip up the underside of Aziraphale’s cock, then took the head in his mouth and sucked. *Hard.* He would have laughed at Aziraphale losing track of his sentence over it, had he not been otherwise occupied trying to evacuate the man’s higher brain function via his dick.

Crowley set a relentless pace, bobbing his head in time with Aziraphale’s panted breaths, just to see if he could make them stutter. Aziraphale’s fingers twitched into his periphery, the same hesitation he’d noticed before, so Crowley used his free hand to guide Aziraphale’s grip into his hair.

“Ah, I’ll be—be careful, I don’t want to hurt—oh Lord, just like that,” Aziraphale gasped as Crowley took his cock a little deeper. Aziraphale’s hand on his head was so gentle and soft, despite the tremor becoming obvious in his leg. Crowley thought it rather sweet, really.

He pulled back momentarily, if only to reassure Aziraphale, but maintained the strokes with his hand. “Not gonna hurt me, Angel. Pull if you want.”

“Mmhm,” Aziraphale agreed with a frantic nod, but Crowley wasn’t sure the message sunk in because Aziraphale’s eyes were squeezed shut, his lips pressed into a thin line, and his body shaking like a particularly high-strung leaf. Crowley always relished reducing a man to a quivering, wanting mess, it gave him the same power-drunk high he got when he pushed his own body beyond its limits on a climb.

Crowley decided the time was right to deliver the killing blow. He moved his hand out of the way, gripped Aziraphale’s thighs, took a gulping breath, and swallowed his cock down past his soft palate, sending up a brief prayer that his gag reflex would hold out. He didn’t want to risk bringing in his more prurient ‘choke me on your cock, daddy,’ interests without at least a preliminary discussion. That was only polite.

“Oh Lord—I am going to—you’re going to make me...” Aziraphale tugged lightly on Crowley’s hair to signal his impending climax, but Crowley didn’t need the warning. Aziraphale’s entire body tensed, his fingers curled a little tighter, his cock throbbed in his mouth. Crowley flicked his eyes upward to catch Aziraphale’s gaze, and was surprised to find him already watching. Crowley gave

him a quick, saucy wink and smiled around his cock best he could. That was apparently all the permission Aziraphale needed.

“Fuck! Crowl—oh!” He cried out as he curled forward over Crowley’s head and flexed his hips.

Crowley realized he hadn’t heard Aziraphale swear before. Somewhere between that mental non-sequitur and the feeling of Aziraphale’s cock throbbing in his mouth, Crowley resolved to blow this man’s mind as often and as vigorously as he could for the foreseeable future.

Aziraphale released Crowley’s hair and sagged back into the couch as he sucked in deep breaths, chest heaving. Crowley sat back on his heels and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Good?” Crowley asked, and Aziraphale laughed with the last bit of energy he had as he eased the condom off, tied it up, and tossed it toward a wastebasket, not seeming to care whether or not it landed.

He looked down at Crowley, both of them smiling and breathless.

“Beyond good. Phenomenal. Come here, please,” Aziraphale reached out to encourage Crowley back up onto his lap and Crowley gladly acquiesced, sinking into his embrace with a grateful sigh.

Aziraphale made long, slow strokes up and down Crowley’s back. He kissed his hair, his temple, his cheek, and whispered praise.

“You’re incredible, my dear.”

“I do try,” Crowley grinned.

“You succeed.”

“Hah. Suck-ceed.”

Aziraphale groaned and rolled his eyes, but his affection was clear. “Your jokes leave something to be desired.”

“You just need to get on my level of humor.”

“Mm. Clearly. I will work on that.”

“Good.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, letting their breathing even out and enjoying the closeness.

“Much as I like this, I should probably…” Crowley motioned down to his crotch with a grimace.

“Oh, Lord, I bet that’s uncomfortable. Yes, of course, please, go get washed up, change, anything you need. Can I get you anything?”

“Nah, m’good. Bathroom down the hall, yeah?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“Mmkay, be right back.”

Crowley gave Aziraphale an apologetic peck on the lips and clambered off his lap to go find his overnight bag, which he was pretty sure he’d abandoned somewhere between the foyer and the kitchen, but he couldn’t recall much with any great clarity just then. He’d just had a hard reset on his grey matter, which would take time to recuperate.

Once he found his bag, he grabbed a pair of soft black joggers and a fresh pair of boxers, and backtracked to the hall bathroom to change. When he emerged and returned to the library, Aziraphale was sitting on the chesterfield with *80 Days* in hand.

“Readin’ ahead on me?” Crowley asked as he sauntered in, giving Aziraphale an accusatory stare.

“Yes, and I don’t want to spoil the plot for you, but I think he makes it in eighty days!” Aziraphale was good at playing along with Crowley’s silliness, and he lov—liked that. A lot.

“I can’t believe you would do this to me,” Crowley said and worked up some watery eyes and a little sniffle.

“Horrible, aren’t I?” Aziraphale smiled, looking wholly unapologetic and a little bitchy. Crowley thought bitchy looked stupid hot on him.

“The worst.”

“Mm. Quite.”

“You wanna start on chapter two?” Crowley asked hopefully as he joined Aziraphale on the sofa.

“Only if you do.”

“Go for it. I gotta find out if Phileas makes it around the world in eighty days. Inquiring minds, Angel.”

“Alright, get in here,” Aziraphale said and patted his thigh with his free hand.

Crowley lay back out on the couch with his head in Aziraphale’s lap. He drifted off into a lazy mid-morning nap to the sound of Aziraphale’s narration.

[crowley_interview_session3_finalfinalFINAL.mp4]

“...So I did this dyno from the shitty little handhold I was on to the shitty little handhold I needed to get to, and completely missed. Just fell and busted my ass. Nat laughed at me for two days over that one ‘cause she told me not to try it.” Crowley grinned like he wasn’t sorry for having tried it at all.

“Sorry, just quickly, what is a ‘dyno’?” Aziraphale asked.

“Oh, right, yeah!” Crowley always got so excited when asked to explain climbing terminology, it was infectious. “Okay, so, a dyno is when you jump from one spot on the rock wall to another,

rather than reaching out to the next handhold. You just jump over. So there's a moment where you're not touching anything."

Aziraphale was certain that his eyebrows were mingling with his hairline. "That seems..."

"Oh yeah, it is," Crowley laughed and nodded.

"But why take the jump? What if you miss?" It seemed like a ridiculous risk to take, when one was already risking so much.

"Well, if you miss, then you fall. So, ya know, don't miss."

"Obviously."

"Yeah. And sometimes you dyno to show off, that's totally a thing." Crowley looked as if he were guilty of that very thing on a regular basis. "But sometimes you don't have any other choice. You're just at a place where you either don't have any other options or maybe the best choice is the dyno, so you gotta..." Crowley trailed off and made a sweeping gesture with his hands.

"Take the leap of faith?" Aziraphale suggested.

"Exactly. Gotta do what you gotta do if you want to top out."

"When you say 'top out,' that simply means finishing the climb, yes?"

"Yep. Topping out is literally just pulling your body over the top edge of the rock."

"That must be a satisfying moment every time."

"Oh yeah. That feeling never gets old. You're sweaty and gross and exhausted, but the hard part is done, and now you can flop out on the ground and have a nap."

"You don't!"

"No, no. Not really. Nat would kill me, down there on belay while I'm snoozing. But God, do I feel like it sometimes. All the adrenaline and the nerves wear off. You're finally safe. Prime nap material."

Chapter End Notes



Join us on the [Belayed Gratification Discord Server](#) for early notice of fic updates, WIPs of the illustrations as I work on them (server members see 'em first!) wild theories and speculation, pictures of rocks, an archive of the illustrations for this story, and silly conversation with other weirdos and degenerates, because that is absolutely a thing that we all needed.

Also catch me on:

[Bluesky](#)

[Instagram](#)
[Xitter](#)

First Ascent

Chapter Summary

The weekend-long fuckfest continues.

Chapter Notes

⚠ Daddy Kink. Unapologetically so.

Other stuff:

- Negotiated kink
- D/s dynamics
- Some very light, gentle humiliation/degradation

ETA (7/16/25): I've had a few folks comment with some confusion about the interview scenes at the end of each chapter, so perhaps a clarification is in order in case you are perplexed, too!

! The interview scenes at the end of each chapter are flashbacks to the interview that already happened. We are seeing Crowley's interview from Hand Hold (Chapter 4 by AO3 count) in a piecemeal fashion, as each section of the interview relates to the development of their relationship.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Aziraphale let Crowley sleep. Honestly, if he could have napped sitting up right there on the couch, he would have drifted off, too. But Crowley's head was in his lap, and he couldn't bear the idea of moving this precious man just to lay out, so he waited quietly and read while Crowley got some much-needed rest.

It wasn't much of a hardship, really. Aziraphale loved the closeness and listening to Crowley's slow, even breaths. He loved glancing down from time to time at his peaceful face, those long auburn lashes fanned across his freckled cheeks, those soft, kiss-bitten pink lips parted slightly, that wild shock of red hair that Aziraphale's fingers itched to touch again and again.

Crowley slept for an hour and a half before he finally stirred. Aziraphale was glad for it. His left leg was going numb up to the ass cheek and he was entertaining thoughts of gnawing it off like a coyote in a trap.

"Hnnn, time s'it?" Crowley grumbled and peeked one bleary eye open.

“Just after two. You can sleep longer if you’d like, though I’ve lost the feeling in my leg so you’ll have to let me free first,” Aziraphale smiled apologetically and ran his fingers through Crowley’s hair.

“Mmnaaaaaah,” Crowley shook his head and rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes to beat back the sleep. “Should prolly get up if I want any hope of sleeping tonight.”

“A wise man, indeed. Do you want any lunch?” Aziraphale suggested lightly.

Crowley nodded sleepily and yawned. “Sounds good. Leftovers?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Crowley pushed himself upright and straightened out his henley and his sleep-rumpled hair. Aziraphale couldn’t help but stare. The man was improbably stunning, his features somehow both sharp and severe but so soft with sleep, bathed in a ray of late afternoon light streaming in through the library windows that caused his hair to blaze copper. He stretched his arms up and arched over the couch back, causing his shirt to ride up and exposing the most delicious strip of skin around those small hips, below his belly button.

Aziraphale wanted to live there.

“What?” Crowley asked with a sleepy little smile when he caught Aziraphale gawping.

“You’re very...” Aziraphale faltered, floundering, searching fruitlessly for a single word that could even begin to describe the man next to him.

“M’very what?”

“Attractive. Handsome. Singularly so. I admit that I’m a little flabbergasted that you’re here on my couch.”

Spots of pink flushed Crowley’s cheeks, neck, and chest, and he looked suddenly abashed in a way that Aziraphale had not seen before. It was startlingly charming.

“Ahh, shaddup you old softy,” he deflected, but grinned nevertheless and reached out to squeeze Aziraphale’s knee. “C’mon, I need to get another cup of coffee in me.”

They pattered off to the kitchen and worked in comfortable silence to reheat leftovers and make another pot of coffee. Aziraphale thought that he could very easily become addicted to that easy domesticity.

They reconvened a short while later in Aziraphale’s living room, which was really more like an annex to his library, given all the bookshelves jammed full of volumes that wouldn’t fit in the library proper. Crowley curled up on the chintzy sofa with his feet tucked under him as Aziraphale set about starting a fire on the hearth.

“What made you want to do movies?” Crowley asked. “Er, documentaries. This place looks more like an author’s house.”

“Or a librarian’s,” Aziraphale said over his shoulder with a smile.

“Or that, yeah.”

“Hm. Well,” Aziraphale began as he stacked some firewood in the grate, “I honestly thought of becoming a writer, originally. An academic writer, I mean, not fiction. But I took a film studies class in college as an elective, and we watched and analyzed some documentaries, and I enjoyed the format. There’s a weight that visual evidence lends to the truth of things that interests me.”

“So it wasn’t your major?”

“No, no. I majored in English Literature. The film thing was happenstance.” Aziraphale stuffed some tinder in between the logs.

“How did you start?”

“Well, I took a job in the English Department after I finished my doctorate—”

Crowley perked up at that. “Woah, wait. ‘Scuse me, you mean to tell me you’ve been *Doctor Fell* this whole time, and I didn’t know it?”

“I suppose so. I rarely care to make a big deal of it.” He struck a match and lit the tinder.

“Wow. Explains a lot,” Crowley conceded, vividly imagining some spicy student-teacher scenarios and trying very hard to keep hold of the thread of conversation.

“Oh? Like what?” Satisfied that the fire was well and truly going, Aziraphale stood back up from his hearth side crouch and turned to face Crowley.

“The whole,” Crowley broadly waved the hand not holding his coffee mug at Aziraphale, “sexy daddy professor, ‘give me a lecture about what a naughty boy I’ve been then spank my ass red’ thing you’ve got going on.” He wiggled his eyebrows salaciously to drive the point home.

Aziraphale giggled. “Sexy daddy professor?”

“Yeah, it’s a whole-ass vibe with you. Very hot. I like it.” Crowley patted the couch beside him, and Aziraphale gathered his lunch plates, plural, and joined him.

“I’m glad,” he said and pulled a footstool over to arrange his feast on it.

“So the documentaries...?” Crowley prompted, curious.

“Oh, right! Well, I took a job in the English Department with my sights set on becoming a tenured professor, and had been there a little over a year when a student came to me about a project she was working on. She was a film major, interested in cinematography, and wanted help with organizing her thoughts into a longer-form piece. We started emailing about it, and when she began filming over the summer, she invited me to join. It ended up being a lovely collaboration. We sold the film to our current production company, Heaven’s Gate, and it was a far greater success than either of us expected. She was still extremely young, so I took the lead on negotiations, and we ended up in a contract to produce more films. The rest is history.”

“Maggie?” Crowley guessed.

“Yes,” Aziraphale said with that devastating smile again as he tucked in to his leftovers. “She’s wonderful.”

“And Nina?” Crowley honestly had no idea how Nina and Maggie fit as a pair. They were polar opposites in personality, but they seemed to make it work. Perhaps it was that very difference that made it work.

“Nina was Maggie’s classmate, actually. She helped with the camera work for that first film. They fell in love during the project and have been together since.”

“Cute.”

“They are,” Aziraphale said fondly.

“Do you still like it? The filmmaking?”

“Oh, yes. I mean, it’s a job like any other. There are parts that I despise, and sometimes I get frustrated when I can’t work on the topics I want to work on, but I still enjoy the process. I love meeting people and getting to talk to them about their lives.”

“You’re good at it.” Crowley genuinely meant it, too. Aziraphale had a presence that made people want to tell him things. It made Crowley want to tear his bleeding heart out and offer it up on a silver plate for Aziraphale’s inspection and approval.

“Well, thank you. I appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome,” Crowley said reflexively, then after a beat, “what about a documentary about rock climbers?”

Aziraphale laughed, “What about it?”

“Why me? Us? Me an’ Nat an’ Newt.”

“Ah. Yes,” Aziraphale cleared his throat and suddenly looked a little sheepish. “Well, I have to admit to you that it wasn’t my original idea.” He gave an apologetic grimace.

Crowley clutched his clawed hand to his chest and fell back against the couch in an Oscar-winning performance. He might have shed a single tear. “Aw. Heartbreak!”

Aziraphale looked at him flatly. “I’m sure. No, my original idea was mountaineering, a documentary about the history of the sport, the Sir Edmund Hillary types.”

“Mm. Very aristocratic, out there conquering mountains and testing the limits of human endurance or whatever,” Crowley mimed summiting a mountain victoriously, hands on his hips and squinting cinematically out into the distance, surveying the horizon.

“Mmhm. Something like that. But Gabriel—that’s my producer at Heaven’s Gate—he pushed for this idea. He wanted something more modern. They gave me a list of potential interviewees, and you were on it.”

“Huh. How ‘bout that.” Crowley didn’t miss the sour look when Aziraphale mentioned Heaven’s Gate.

“I will admit to you now that I wasn’t very excited about it, initially.” Aziraphale glanced sidelong at Crowley.

“I could tell.”

“You could not!” Aziraphale gasped and looked genuinely affronted.

“Could too,” Crowley nodded sagely. “You didn’t want to be there any more than I did.”

Aziraphale’s expression softened. Then he laughed fondly. “You were a proper little shit.”

“I know,” Crowley grinned, looking entirely unapologetic.

“And now?” Aziraphale asked with a soft tentativeness that belied their joking mood.

“What, now that I’m banging the director?”

Aziraphale scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Well, if you want to be crass about it.”

Crowley’s grin spread a little wider. “I do.”

“Very well then,” Aziraphale conceded. “What about now that you’re banging the director?” There was that bitchy little glint again on that angelic face. Crowley couldn’t get enough of it.

“Weeeeeeeell,” he drawled, stretching out on the couch and pretending to consider his answer, “that certainly helps.”

“I’m so very flattered,” Aziraphale said dryly with an arched brow that Crowley wanted to kiss.

“Thought y’ might be. But uh, nah, I’m good with it now. I mean, I’m not thrilled at the idea of having all my shit out there for Joe Q. Whoever-the-Fuck to see, but I figure it’s already on YouTube anyway, so whaddya gonna do?” Crowley shrugged. He was trying very hard to convince himself that it would be fine.

“It might bring more attention than YouTube, though. You realize that.”

Aziraphale was right. Crowley knew that Aziraphale was right. Aziraphale knew that Crowley knew that Aziraphale was right. He was just choosing not to think about it, because thinking about it made him want to throw up a little, and he didn’t want to ruin Aziraphale’s nice Persian rug. It looked expensive, or really old, or both. “Yeah. Cross that bridge when I get to it, I s’pose.”

“Why agree to do the film in the first place, then? If you’re so uncomfortable with it,” Aziraphale asked gently.

There it was. That was the question. *Why, indeed, Crowley?*

“Ah. Yeah. Here’s the thing. I... didn’t?” Crowley cringed and kind of wanted to slither under the couch and hide, rather than admit to any of it.

“You... didn’t?” Aziraphale looked surprised. Crowley could practically see his mind whirling away with the possibilities—forged signatures, Crowley being forced to do the film under duress, some sort of mind control situation. Who knows?

“Well, I did,” Crowley corrected quickly. “But I didn’t. Uh, I may have signed the docs without realizing what I was actually signing up for.”

“No!” Aziraphale gasped.

“Yeah. We had just left this long ass meeting with some brand reps, and Nat had the papers with her. I was tired and I just sort of... sign whatever she puts in front of me?” There we go. Time to slither under the couch now.

“That is a terrible idea.”

“Well, in retrospect, yeah.”

Aziraphale pondered it for a moment and then concluded, “But you trust her.”

Crowley nodded. “With my fuckin’ life, every time we climb. And... and she’s not wrong. I mean, as much as I hate the idea of letting people look in on my life, it’s good for the business. For the brand. For what we do. It’s an opportunity. I don’t have the luxury to turn those down yet.”

“Well, for my part in it, I’m sorry,” Aziraphale said, sounding genuinely aggrieved.

“Nah, not your fault.” Crowley waved his apology away. “Sounds like we both kinda got roped into this against our will.”

“That would appear to be the case.”

“Least we’re makin’ the best of it, eh?”

“I think so,” Aziraphale nodded with a hopeful smile and started on his second, smaller plate of leftovers. Some kind of pastry.

“Me too,” Crowley agreed as he reached for his forgotten cup of coffee and took a sip.

“You mentioned leaving home young, back in the interview,” Aziraphale asked, mid-pastry. “I haven’t stopped wondering since... what happened?”

Crowley hesitated, fingers drumming a slow rhythm around his mug. “I stuck around the gym more than I stuck around school,” he said. “Wasn’t exactly a model student. Graduated as early as I could, got the hell out.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

“That’s awfully young to leave home.”

“Mmm.” Crowley stared up at the ceiling. “Wasn’t much of a home.”

He didn’t elaborate.

Aziraphale waited. Not pushing—he was just there.

Eventually, Crowley said, “Let’s just say there was a scandal. Small town with big opinions, that sorta thing. It was easier to disappear than to stick around and pretend to be someone I wasn’t.”

“Scandal?” Aziraphale asked gently.

“Don’t worry,” Crowley said, flashing a crooked smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I didn’t murder anyone. Just broke the wrong hearts in the wrong order, I guess.”

He changed the subject before Aziraphale could ask more.

They passed the late afternoon hours fireside, chatting occasionally as Crowley scrolled his social media feeds and Aziraphale read. By the time the sun began to set, Crowley was feeling a bit of cabin fever. He got that way sometimes, when he didn’t have a proper outlet for his restlessness.

He stretched his limbs in a big, dramatic arch and looked at Aziraphale pointedly.

“You’re like a dog begging to be taken for a walk. I can feel the energy vibrating out of you,” Aziraphale said, never taking his eyes off his book.

“M’gettin’ antsy. Ya wanna go out?”

“Out? What, like to a club?” Aziraphale looked at Crowley like he’d sprouted extra limbs spontaneously.

“Oh god, no!” He laughed, “I meant out for a walk, like you said.”

“Hm, well, we can probably do that. I can go get my coat?” Aziraphale suggested, and waved toward the foyer.

Crowley would have begun bouncing in place if he had only slightly less self-control. “Please.”

“Alright,” Aziraphale said as he marked his page and put his book on the side table.

“Yes! I’ll get my shoes on.” Crowley rubbed his hands together and sprang up from the couch.

“Do try not to pee on my floor in excitement.”

“No promises, Angel.”

Aziraphale rolled his eyes and led them back to the foyer to don their outerwear.

The sun had just set when they stepped outside, the evening light not yet faded. Aziraphale locked his front door and pocketed the key, then turned to catch sight of Crowley huffing breaths into the cold air.

“This time of year’s the worst,” Crowley griped. “Gettin’ dark at like five p.m.”

“Well, let’s make the most of it. Which way?”

Crowley looked down the sidewalk in both directions, assessed his options, then hooked a thumb to the right for no particular reason.

“M’hands are fuckin’ freezing already.”

“Here, give me one.” Aziraphale held out his hand to take Crowley’s, which Crowley gladly accepted. He thought it might feel silly, two grown men holding hands like teenage boyfriends, but

it was oddly comforting.

They walked Aziraphale's neighborhood sidewalks for nearly half an hour, until the sky was well and truly dark.

"We should probably head back. I do believe that our fingers have frozen together." Aziraphale held their hands up for inspection. Their fingers were chapped red from the cold. Crowley legitimately couldn't feel them. He hadn't been able to for a solid ten minutes, but he didn't want to let go of Aziraphale's hand. He was stubborn like that.

"Prolly a good idea. We can get dinner?"

"I'll cook again, never you worry," Aziraphale declared decisively, and started leading them back toward his house.

"You don't have to do that, Angel. We can get delivery or somethin'. I don't wanna make you do all that work," Crowley protested, despite his desire for another home-cooked meal. They didn't actually cook much at Nat and Newt's. It was more of a free-for-all type environment that resulted in an astonishing amount of frozen burritos in Crowley's diet. Like... a concerning amount of frozen burritos. At least he usually microwaved them first.

"Stop that. I want to cook, you silly man. I love cooking. And I'd like to make dinner for you."

Well, who the fuck was Crowley to say no to a beautiful man asking to cook him dinner?

After they returned home—err, to Aziraphale's house—they put away their coats and shook out the cold, then found their way to the kitchen. Aziraphale made pasta and tomato sauce, happily puttering around the countertops and stove for half an hour while Crowley looked on fondly from the dinette and gave color commentary.

They sat down to eat with *actual cloth napkins* that made Crowley wonder what dimension of time and space Aziraphale had been transported from. He was absolutely unreal, and in the best way.

Aziraphale popped the cork on a bottle of red and offered a glass to Crowley, who declined.

"Nah, I'm good."

Aziraphale didn't comment on the refusal, he simply poured his own glass. Still, Crowley felt an itch in his brain like he needed to explain himself.

"This is all off the record, yeah?"

"What?"

"The documentary."

"The docu—oh! Of course I wouldn't, that's not—I'm not... no. I mean, yes! All off the record." Aziraphale looked a little hurt that Crowley would even think that he would put anything told in confidence into a film for Heaven's Gate to profit.

"Right. Well, I'll say this much: I don't drink any alcohol and I don't take anything stronger than an aspirin because if I start, then I won't be able to stop. Uh, except some weed occasionally, but that was never a problem for me to begin with."

“Oh. I see.”

“Yeah. Misspent youth or whatever.”

“Should I not...?” Aziraphale motioned to his wine glass.

“No, no, you’re fine. I’m not at any imminent risk or anything. It’s been a long ass time. Only when shit really goes down and I get too stressed out, that’s when those thoughts creep up. But now I just go have a cigarette and do these stupid breathing exercises, and that seems to do the trick. Or wearing my ass out at the climbing gym.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Aziraphale did sound truly relieved, and it made something warm wash over Crowley.

“Yeah, me fuckin’ too. It was a tiring lifestyle.”

“So... Cannabis?” Aziraphale asked, tentative and curious, like he was trying to tiptoe around the subject but couldn’t help diving right in.

Crowley grinned, fork paused halfway to his mouth. “What about it, Angel?”

“You said you still...” Aziraphale waved his fork around in a small circle. “From time to time.”

“I do,” Crowley nodded. “That a problem for you?”

“Oh, no. Far be it from me to judge. I was more... curious?”

Crowley leaned back in his chair, smug. “So that’s how it is! Using me for my hookup!”

“I’m doing nothing of the sort,” Aziraphale huffed. “I am—I’m politely inquiring!”

“Uh-huh. I see,” Crowley tilted his head, smirk deepening. “So what would you be politely inquiring about, Angel? Specifically?”

“Oh, hush. And stop looking at me like that.”

“M’not lookin’ at you like anything.”

“Yes, you are, you obstinate man,” Aziraphale said, half-laughing, half-flustered. “What I was trying to say was that I’ve—well, I’ve never had the opportunity. So, so if you wanted to, we could. I mean that I’m open to it.”

Crowley blinked, then gave a slow, crooked smile. “You want me to get you high, Angel?”

“Well, not right now!” Aziraphale said quickly, eyes going wide.

“So what, like... Twenty minutes? Finish up dinner, give the dishes a scrub, then go become one with the couch?”

Aziraphale stared. “What—wait a second, do you *have it with you?*”

“Ohho, so scandalized, Angel!” Crowley said, laughing. “Yes, of course I do. Well, I have a vape pen, in case of emergencies.”

“Emergencies?” Aziraphale arched a brow, skeptical.

“Mmhm. Anxiety and stuff. It helps sometimes.”

“Does it?”

“For some people, yeah,” Crowley shrugged. “I mean, you can *definitely* go too far and end up more anxious than you started, but that’s just about being careful and knowing your limits. For a first timer, I’d say no more than one quick hit, then see how you feel.”

“How—how does it feel?”

“Being high?” Crowley set down his fork and leaned his elbows on the table, warming to the subject. “Mmm. Well, it’s a little floaty. Kinda silly. You wanna laugh at everything. Sometimes you get super hungry—”

“The munchies,” Aziraphale whispered with so much awe that Crowley burst into laughter.

“Yeah, Angel, the munchies. And uhh... God, it’s a lot of different things. Sometimes you get sleepy, or really creative. Sometimes you just flop out and ponder the universe. Sometimes you get super horny. That one gets me a lot.”

And *that* certainly seemed to capture Aziraphale’s attention. “Really?!”

“Mmhm. Really, what happens is that you let go of some of your hangups, anxieties, whatever, so you feel a little freer to do whatcha wanna do.”

“Oh,” Aziraphale breathed reverently, and it was the cutest fucking thing Crowley had ever seen.

“Yeah. You wanna try it?”

“Well...” Aziraphale began, but hesitated.

“Doesn’t have to be now. Or even soon. But if you ever do, let me know. I gotcha.”

“Yes. Perhaps not tonight. I’d rather keep my faculties for the time being. But maybe next date?”

Next date next date next date next date—

“Sure thing, Angel. I’d be proud to be your dealer.” Crowley grinned, wide and toothy.

“Oh, dear Lord.” Aziraphale seemed to lament his decision of even bringing the topic up.

“This is really, really fucking good, by the way,” Crowley said through a mouthful of pasta, pointing at the plate with his fork. “You’re an incredible cook. Don’t think I’ve eaten this well in... Like, ever.”

Aziraphale smiled genially. “Thank you, my dear. I’m flattered. And very glad that you like it!”

“Love it,” he corrected.

“Me too,” Aziraphale said, and Crowley wondered for a moment whether they were still discussing the food.

Woah, there. Slow down, old boy. What the fuck, it's the first date.

Crowley cleared his throat to knock that thought loose. "So... It's probably worth a conversation while we're here. Before we, uh, go any further. About what we're into. I mean, I know we kinda jumped the gun earlier in your library, but..."

"But it's never too late to discuss the important things, hm?"

"Exactly. So I guess... hard noes first or...?" Crowley held out his hands as if to open the floor for suggestions, but Aziraphale only nodded his agreement.

"Of course."

"Right. Yeah. So... so for me it's gonna be a no on anything to do with body fluids besides spit and cum." That was a good place to start. He didn't have anything against people who wanted to piss on each other, he just didn't want to do it himself, and that was usually pretty common ground among a lot of folks, he figured.

"Yes, same here." *Phew. So far, so good.*

"Good. Aaaaaand... I don't like a lot of pain, giving or receiving. Just doesn't do it for me." Crowley shrugged.

"How much is a lot?" Aziraphale asked, which was a valid question.

Crowley thought it over for a moment. "I mean, definitely yes—pull my hair, smack my ass, bite me, choke me on your cock, all that, but nothing that breaks skin. And I don't wanna get beaten or slapped across the face or like, choked until I pass out." Pretty standard, he figured.

Aziraphale surprised him by asking: "Spanking?"

Crowley felt his face light up with completely raw, unconcealed interest; he couldn't even pretend to play it cool on that one. "With a hand, hell yeah. With a belt or something? Pass."

Aziraphale's posture relaxed. "Oh, good. That's a relief. I'm none too keen on any of the truly rough stuff, either."

"Aside from that, I'm pretty flexible. I'll try anything twice." Crowley grinned and wiggled his eyebrows salaciously.

Aziraphale blew off his unsubtle entendre with a good-natured (though long-suffering) huff. "Well, it would appear that we are fairly well aligned so far. I'd only add that I don't have much desire to degrade you verbally."

Crowley had kind of figured that one out already. "You're more of a praise guy, huh?"

"Very much so," Aziraphale agreed, and Crowley's mind wandered off to start playing with its 'good boy, you're doing so well for me' toys, before he snapped his attention back to the matter at hand. *Focus.*

"What about do's?" He asked, trying to keep it business-like as long as he could. *This was important, dammit.*

“Oh yes,” Aziraphale began as he *wiggled in his seat*. “ Well, I do enjoy a lot of teasing, edging, and orgasm denial.”

Crowley could hardly wait to get fucking wrecked by this man.

“I am so very into that. My joggers might not survive this conversation. Jesus. Ah... Oh! Do you top? Bottom?”

“Both, actually.”

“Same, but a strong preference to bottom most of the time, not gonna lie.”

Crowley swore he could see a glint of mischief as Aziraphale smiled. “I can work with that.”

Thank fuck.

“M’also pretty into being told what to do,” Crowley offered as well.

Aziraphale raised his eyebrows and looked briefly as if he was going to challenge the idea that Crowley, of all people, would ever want to be told what to do by *anyone*, but appeared to reconsider that tack and said instead: “Then we’ll get on famously.”

“Good. What about—like earlier? ‘Good boy’ and all that?”

“It seemed like you rather enjoyed that.”

“Yeah. Almost too much.”

“And you—you wanted to call me...”

“Daddy?” Crowley bared his teeth in a wolfish grin.

“Yes.”

“Ah. Yeah. Not a must-have for me, but a really-really-really-like-to-have. If it bothers you, though, it’s straight out,” Crowley said, and he honestly meant it. He wouldn’t have been interested in doing any kind of role play that made Aziraphale uncomfortable. He just hoped to God that Aziraphale liked it.

“Quite the opposite, actually. It’s new to me, but I will admit that it struck a chord.”

“Yeah? Really?” Crowley perked up.

“Mm. I would be quite pleased if that continued.”

Crowley actually sighed in relief. “Well, thank fuck for that because you are *such* a Daddy, you don’t even know.”

Aziraphale laughed and rolled his eyes at Crowley’s antics. And probably his persistent horniness, too.

Crowley was a man on a mission, though. “Any other do’s?” he asked.

Aziraphale mulled it over for a moment, but said, “Not at the moment. You?”

“None that I can think of, no,” Crowley agreed, then added, “Cool. Well, it’s been a while for me, but I’m happy to go get tested and all that. Probably not gonna get me pregnant, either.”

“Likewise. I don’t anticipate anything showing up, but I will get tested, nevertheless. Until then, we can use protection.”

As much as Crowley loved a proper cum-soaked breeding session, it was the smart, adult thing to do, so he agreed readily. “Good by me.”

They meandered away from the topic of their burgeoning sex life for the rest of dinner, for which Crowley was actually very grateful. He really did like the pasta and enjoyed just listening to Aziraphale talk about his life and his documentaries, doubly so.

Once the plates were scraped clean and stowed away in the dishwasher, the wine-bottle re-corked for Aziraphale’s future use, and the leftovers packaged up in the refrigerator, Crowley figured it was as good a time as any to make his case for a repeat performance of their earlier sexual adventures in the library.

“D’you wanna...?” Crowley made a vague motion toward *anywhere but the kitchen*, and Aziraphale seemed immediately to pick up on the simmering intent underlying his question.

“I would like that very much. Perhaps not straight to the bedroom, but—”

“Make out like kids on the couch?” Crowley suggested with a waggle of his brows. He was doing that a lot lately. He wondered if it was possible to strain a brow waggle muscle. He might find out.

Aziraphale giggled at the phrasing but nodded excitedly, and they both summarily vacated the kitchen for climes better suited to feeling each other up.

Of course, they didn’t even make it to the couch. At least not for the first three rounds of frantic kisses and quick, artless gropes strewn through the kitchen, then the hallway leading to the living room, then on the threshold of the doorway to the living room.

Aziraphale had Crowley pressed against the doorjamb, their legs slotted together and their hands roving more leisurely than before, though no less heated. Crowley felt fingers clutch at the hem of his Henley and a little tug.

“Yes, yeah, please,” he said breathlessly, and obediently raised his arms above his head to allow Aziraphale to peel his shirt off.



“My darling, you are sublime,” Aziraphale said as he tossed Crowley’s shirt on a credenza near the door and began tracing the planes and valleys of Crowley’s belly as they heaved with his breaths. Crowley shivered as his fingers trailed up from his waistband, circled around his navel, and drew slowly up his sternum.

“Fuck, you keep talkin’ like that and this will be a very, very quick experience,” Crowley warned.

“Mm, that’s okay. I like that you enjoy the praise.”

“S’hot as fuck, Angel. But I’d really like to last a little longer than two minutes.” And honestly, if things kept going the way they were, he figured about forty-five seconds was the best he could do. The crisp, sweet smell of Aziraphale’s aftershave was making his brain swimmy.

“You’ll be fine. You’re going to be a good boy for me, aren’t you?”

Crowley groaned. Aziraphale was going to weaponize that against him, he could already tell.

“And when do good boys get to come?”

“Oh, *fuck*,” Crowley cursed and let his forehead fall to Aziraphale’s shoulder.

“*When?*” Aziraphale pressed.

Apparently, this task master was going to make Crowley use his words. And how fucking unfair was that shit? “*Ah*, shit, fuck, Angel. *Ah*, when... When you say I can?” He tried.

“Exactly. Very good.”

Aziraphale threaded his fingers into Crowley’s hair and pulled his head back. He mouthed up one of the tendons of his neck before pausing just beside Crowley’s ear and whispered, “Is this okay with you?”

“Fuck yeah it is. Keep going, please, this is all fucking amazing. Ten out of ten. No notes.”

“Good. And you’ll let me know if I do anything you don’t like, won’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Say it correctly, please.”

“Jesus Christ—yes, I meant yes.”

“Yes, *what*?”

“Oh god, yes, sir?” Crowley wasn’t sure what he was thinking. Their entire conversation earlier had already slipped his mind. He blamed the horniness.

“No, not quite. Try again.”

“Y-yes... Yes, Daddy?”

“That’s my very good boy. Perfect. Thank you.”

The man gave Crowley emotional whiplash. In one moment he was bookish and silly and more than a little fussy, but in the next he could do *this*, reducing Crowley to the human embodiment of a whimper with such a commanding and effortless air of authority that it made his head spin.

“Now, listen carefully,” Aziraphale continued, “because I do not like to repeat myself.”

Crowley listened so hard he thought his eardrums might burst. He yearned to be good for Aziraphale, so he funneled every brain cell that was still online and responding to his requests into his flagging attention span. It wasn't much, but he figured he could be forgiven due to extenuating circumstances.

"First, I want you to take off the rest of your clothes for me. Can you do that?"

"Mmhm," Crowley nodded. He had that lust-drunk feeling again. Aziraphale was scary good at getting him to that headspace.

"Hop to, then."

Aziraphale leaned away just enough to make space as Crowley's desperate fingers clawed at his belt buckle, then the fly of his jeans. He divested himself of his pants and boxers in one fell swoop, leaving them to pool on the floor around his ankles as he toed off his socks.

"Very good," Aziraphale said with an appraising sweep of his gaze down Crowley's lithe form. "Now I want you to get on the sofa with your knees on the seat and your elbows on the backrest."

That lit Crowley on fucking fire. There was something heady about being completely bare and exposed while Aziraphale was still fully dressed. It made his face burn with humiliation in the best way as he clambered onto the couch and into position. He was on his elbows and knees, his ass presented and his cock heavy between his legs.

"Good boy," Aziraphale praised his quick obedience as he approached from behind and soothed a hand up Crowley's flank. "You are perfect like this, offering yourself to me."

"Fuck, please."

"What do you want, my dear?"

"Fuckin'—anything. Touch me, please."

"Very well." Aziraphale stepped in closer and palmed both cheeks of Crowley's ass in his hands, gripping firmly and spreading him open. Crowley was only relieved for a moment before Aziraphale let go and ghosted his knuckles up the sensitive insides of Crowley's thighs. Crowley shivered.

"Do you like that?"

"Y-yeah. S'good. More?"

Aziraphale hummed and repeated the motion up the back of Crowley's legs, down his spine, across his ribs. It was maddening and wonderful.

"Teasing, huh?"

"I told you, didn't I?"

"Fuck. Yeah, you did."

Aziraphale trailed a finger back down Crowley's spine, this time continuing to the cleft of his ass and landing with the gentlest pressure over his hole.

“Ohhhh, fuck, yeah. Yes, there.”

“Impatient boy.”

“Can’t help m’self.”

Aziraphale increased the pressure ever so slightly and began rubbing tiny circles.

“Would you enjoy my tongue here?” He asked with a quick push of the tip of his finger into Crowley’s hole for emphasis.

“Oh god, yeah. Please. Do that.”

Crowley heard Aziraphale’s knees hit the floor behind him a split second before he felt Aziraphale’s broad hands spreading him open again and a hot, wet, torturously slow lick from his balls up to his hole.

“Holy fuck.”

Aziraphale snickered. “Good?” He asked, and Crowley nearly rolled his eyes at the question.

“Very fuckin’ good. Daddy, *please*,” Crowley begged through an embarrassingly loud moan that forced its way out of his chest when Aziraphale repositioned his hands to spread his cheeks even further apart, then pressed a kiss to his perineum.

It had been so very long since Crowley had someone do this. He’d forgotten how intensely erotic it was, how it made his mind turn to a pleasant mush of white noise and lost inhibition so quickly. Aziraphale made incessant, slow, slick stripes over his sensitive hole, occasionally teasing quick circles with the tip of his tongue before pressing inward like he was trying to fuck Crowley with his mouth. He had always enjoyed how shockingly filthy it felt to get rimmed and was further overwhelmed by Aziraphale’s apparent enthusiasm for eating his ass like a Michelin star meal. Somewhere in the sluggish fog of his arousal, Crowley realized that Aziraphale made the same noises of pleasure while tongue-fucking his ass as he did while enjoying good food.

He giggled deliriously and Aziraphale withdrew for a moment to ask, “What has you so tickled, hm?”

“Fuck, Angel, was jus’ thinkin’ you make the same sounds doin’ this as when you eat a fancy pastry,” Crowley laughed, breathless.

Aziraphale smiled. “Are you poking fun at me? Naughty boy.” He slapped one of Crowley’s ass cheeks just hard enough to reprimand.

Crowley moaned again at the sting. “Fuuuck, no, m’not makin’ fun. ‘S hot as hell. Do that again.”

“Do what again?”

“You are such a fuckin’ tease I swear to—fuck, *please spank my ass, Daddy*,” Crowley begged, sounding like a low-budget porn script, or perhaps a character in a smutty fanfic written by a thirsty author with daddy issues.

Aziraphale swatted his ass again, this time on the other side.

“I said spank my ass, not pat it gently.”

“You’ve already turned into a brat, have you?”

“I’ve always been a brat, Dadd—oh!” Crowley’s entire body jolted forward with the force of Aziraphale’s hand connecting with his bottom. The impact alone hurt like hell, but the sharp sting lighting up his skin was intense in a way that went straight to his cock. Aziraphale really put his arm into it that time. “Oh god, yeah, like that. More.”

“You are becoming terribly demanding, my dear.”

“You like it.”

“Hm,” was all Aziraphale said before landing another solid *thwack* on his ass.

Crowley hissed through his teeth and claw-gripped the couch back reflexively. “Oh, ow, fuck, that really hurt, Jesus.”

“Too much?” Aziraphale asked, genuinely worried.

It was touching how much he cared. Or it would have been if Crowley hadn’t been approaching achingly, painfully hard by that point. He didn’t need the gentleness quite yet.

“Fuck no. S’perfect,” he groaned and wiggled his hips in a very unsubtle entreaty for more. “Want your fingers, please?”

“That can be arranged,” Aziraphale said as he leaned toward the small, antique-looking end table beside the sofa and rooted around in the drawer. One of his hands remained on the back of Crowley’s thigh as a reminder of his presence, that he wasn’t going anywhere for very long.

“You keep lube in the living room?” Crowley asked as Aziraphale pulled out a small bottle and uncapped it one-handed with a *snick*.

Aziraphale gave him another slap on the ass for that. “I’m not an amateur, darling,” he drawled and disappeared back toward the task at hand.

“Just surprised s’all—Oh!” Crowley yelped, startled, and involuntarily jerked his hips away from the cold, wet sensation at his entrance. Aziraphale gripped his hip tightly with a free hand to prevent him from flying off the couch.

“Shh, stay there,” he soothed, and Crowley relaxed into the press of Aziraphale’s fingers, gently teasing his hole. “There you go. That’s a good boy.”

A relieved sigh escaped Crowley as he let his head drop to his forearms and settled in to enjoy the feeling of having someone else do this for a change. Aziraphale circled his fingers a few more times, quickly added a bit more lube, then gradually increased the pressure of one finger, pushing in slowly. Crowley groaned and tried to rock his ass back to force more inside, but Aziraphale still had his hip held steady.

“Hnnngk, wan’ more. Please?”

“Mm, I suspect it’s best to go slowly. When was the last time you did this? You’re very tight, my dear,” Aziraphale said, and Crowley thought he heard a quiver of strain in his voice. Aziraphale’s

finger slipped in to the second knuckle, and Crowley hissed again at the sudden pressure.

“S’been a while. Don’t do this myself very often... Can’t... Can’t hit the spot with my fingers and toys are always a whole big ordeal, so I—fuck!”

Aziraphale snickered behind him as he slid that one finger out, circled Crowley’s rim, and suddenly pushed it back in a little deeper. “Is that okay?”

It was beyond fucking okay, in Crowley’s opinion. Sure, the first push always felt a little weird more than anything, but the sheer anticipation of two or three of Aziraphale’s thick fingers stretching him out was plenty of motivation.

“Yeah, feels good. Please, more?”

“I do very much enjoy how polite and pliant you get when I’m touching you like this, but we’re going slowly,” Aziraphale reminded him, and Crowley whined like the brat he absolutely was, trying to rock back again.

“Stop squiggling,” Aziraphale scolded with another sharp slap on his ass and pulled his finger free and pushed back in deeper once more.

“M’not fuckin’ squiggling, I’m tryna get *fucked* here,” Crowley protested weakly, but obeyed nevertheless.

Aziraphale laughed and finally pressed that first finger all the way in, “You’re doing so well for me, sweet thing.”

There it was again. *Sweet thing*. Crowley’s poor, neglected dick twitched helplessly at the pet name. He was going to absolutely ruin the upholstery between his knees, he was certain of it.

“Ready for the second one?” Aziraphale asked, and Crowley nodded fervently, so very ready to get more inside him, to finally feel full of something, *anything*.

Aziraphale hummed and pulled his finger out, lining up the second for the push back in. Crowley keened at the new stretch as those two fingers sank in to the second knuckle and stilled. He was fucking panting already, and they were only two fingers in. Did Aziraphale expect him to survive this?

“Alright?” Aziraphale checked in, and Crowley nodded again.

“Yeah, you can move. Fuck, please move.”

Aziraphale, ever merciful, relented and pulled free again, then pushed both fingers back in, sliding deep. He tentatively crooked his fingertips on the out stroke in search of—

“Oh, fuck!” Crowley wailed, actually wailed at full volume, as Aziraphale’s fingers glanced his prostate on the way out, causing his entire body to tense at the bright burst of sharp pleasure.

“Ahh, there it is. That is delightful,” Aziraphale said with a smugness that Crowley found wickedly arousing and thoroughly obnoxious in equal measure, and aimed squarely for that sweet spot on the next in stroke. “You’re very sensitive, aren’t you?”

“M’not *sensitive* you’re just—oh fuck—finger banging my fuckin’ prostate like it’s—ahhn—like it’s a fuckin’ backspace key,” Crowley panted through little gasps and moans, his legs trembling as prickles of sweat broke out across his body.

Aziraphale’s surprised laugh threw off his rhythm just enough to give Crowley a much-needed reprieve, but it was short-lived. Those two fingers withdrew briefly but returned soon and in greater numbers. Three fingers pressed into him slowly, sinking halfway and then pausing as before. The stretch was nearly alarming in its intensity, and Crowley had to fight back his instinctual panic of ‘too much, too fast, won’t fit, flee!’ with a deep, quivering breath and a conscious effort to unclench his muscles.

“Still doing okay?” Aziraphale asked softly as he felt the sudden mount of tension in Crowley’s body. He stroked a hand softly across the dimples on his lower back, over the spare curve of his hip, down his trembling thigh.

“Yeah, yeah, just needed a second. M’okay now. You can move, just... Slow?”

“Of course, as slow as you need,” Aziraphale reassured him, and kept his word, too, pulling out only fractionally then carefully pushing in deeper.

Crowley moaned long and low through the next several strokes, clutching the sofa back like a lifeline, his eyes screwed shut and brows furrowed. It certainly wasn’t painful, far from it, but the pleasure had yet to surmount the visceral feeling of being forced open, no matter how gentle. Fortunately Aziraphale knew his audience, so he sought out Crowley’s prostate again with the pads of his fingers and great purpose.

“Oh-ho shit. Fuck, f-fuck, shit, fuck, yeah, yes, that! Always that,” Crowley rambled senselessly as Aziraphale massaged languid, firm circles against his sweet spot.

“Can you come from this?”

“Hnn. Not sure. Ah! Have done a few times but not—oh, god—not without a vibe, and a couple—fuck, wow, yesssss, ah!—a couple hours to kill.”

Aziraphale hummed thoughtfully. He gave a slow, deliberate thrust of his fingers, just enough to keep Crowley moaning. “I’d like to explore that sometime, if you would.”

“*Jesus*, yeah, we can do that. Whatever you want.” Crowley’s voice cracked with sincerity, wrecked and eager.

“Excellent!” Aziraphale sounded entirely too pleased with himself.

Crowley gasped as Aziraphale’s thumb brushed lower. “Can we—can you—I need—”

Aziraphale chuckled softly, wicked and knowing. “What do you need, sweet thing?”

“F-fuck. Need to come,” Crowley trailed off with a whine. His hips twitched helplessly, chasing friction.

“Do you?”

“Yes!”

Aziraphale paused, fingers stilled but remaining inside him. “Apparently you don’t need it very much.”

“W-what?” Crowley stuttered, struggling to understand this part of the game through the haze of his arousal.

“Didn’t I say earlier that I do not like to repeat myself?” Aziraphale said, tone unreasonably calm, then continued, “I said that you apparently don’t need to come terribly urgently. Do you think you’ve earned it?”

“Yes! Yes, yes. Earned it, promise. Been a good boy for you.” Crowley’s words tumbled over each other in his haste, high and desperate.

“Then it would likely behoove you to ask me nicely to let you come.” He punctuated it with a slow stroke over Crowley’s cock, cruel in its softness.

“Fuck, Daddy, please let me come? Please, please, *please*,” Crowley begged shamelessly, despite the embarrassment burning on his face. He was all-too-aware of the heat of humiliation under his skin, but he didn’t care. Not if it meant Aziraphale would let him come.

Aziraphale’s free hand closed around Crowley’s aching prick again before he could even finish pleading for it.

“You’re so wet for me already, darling,” Aziraphale marveled aloud as he stroked all-too-lightly over the head and dragged his slicked hand back down Crowley’s cock. Crowley whimpered canted his hips into the sensation, straining for the stimulation he desperately craved.

Aziraphale began a steady rhythm, pumping his three fingers in and out of Crowley’s pliant hole in time with the strokes on his cock. Crowley was reduced to babbling and gasping as he swayed between spearing himself back onto Aziraphale’s fingers and fucking forward into his fist.

His orgasm built slowly, beginning low in his belly as a small pool of warmth and creeping outward into his hips and his thighs as the heat increased. He felt his muscles in his pelvis and his core draw up taut as he approached the crest of the wave, his abs twitching spasmodically as little bursts of pleasure coalesced between his hips and intensified.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Good boy. Come for me, let it go, I’ve got you.”

Crowley finally, *finally* peaked with a long, high-pitched cry and a violent shiver, jerking between the two points of contact with Aziraphale’s glorious, clever hands. His hole clamped tight around the fingers bearing it open as his cock pulsed white-hot once, twice, three times and spilled his cum onto the terrible chintzy rose print sofa cushions. *Oops, gonna have to clean that up.*

Aziraphale worked him through his orgasm, unrelenting in the strokes on his cock or the presses through his spasming inner walls against his twitching, swollen prostate. On the backside of the torrent of pleasure that ripped through his body, Crowley whimpered from the continued over stimulation. “Fuck, stop, no more. I can’t—”

Aziraphale yielded, and Crowley all but collapsed forward with an exhausted moan, his face squished into the sofa back, his hair sweaty and mussed.

“Fffffffuck,” he panted, and reached a hand back to wave lazily at Aziraphale. “Be with you in just a minute, soon as I can move again.”

Aziraphale chuckled. “Take your time, my dear. I’ll go get you a washcloth.”

“Y’don’t have to—”

“No, no. I won’t hear it. I want to take care of you,” Aziraphale called out as he wandered off to the bathroom, his voice drifting back into the living room where Crowley was still pathetically slumped. He returned less than a minute later, placing a gentle hand on Crowley’s hip and beginning to clean the questionable mix of fluids off his thighs.

“I can do that m’self, ya know,” Crowley whined but made no real effort demonstrative of that ability, so Aziraphale paid his protests no mind.

“I like doing this part,” he said simply, and something inside Crowley turned all gooey and warm in response, so soppy that he nearly cringed at himself.

“I’m not sure if I’ve come that hard in years.”

“You’re just trying to boost my ego.”

“M’not. S’ttrue.”

“Well, I’m glad, then. Now sit yourself up. Here, I’ve got you a blanket.”

Crowley flopped over onto his side and then pushed himself upright. True to his word, Aziraphale produced a very cozy cream-colored knit blanket and bundled him up like a wobbly post-orgasmic burrito.

“You could probably use a glass of water, hm?” Aziraphale said to himself as he disappeared once more, to the kitchen.

Crowley found it all disgustingly endearing, the aftercare. He did appreciate Aziraphale’s attentiveness to his needs. That was something he’d not experienced in his previous relationships, if you could call them that. Hookups at best, really. So Aziraphale smiling brightly as he returned with a glass of ice water and commanding him to “drink up!” as he joined Crowley on the couch was a pleasant change of pace. And far be it from him to look a gift Dom in the mouth, so he downed the water under Aziraphale’s watchful, fussy eyes, set his glass aside, and made grabby hands toward the other man.

“If you’re gonna do aftercare, then I wanna cuddle,” he demanded with a pout, and Aziraphale softened immediately. Crowley figured that he needed to feel needed afterwards. And Crowley could definitely do *needy*.

He opened his blanket tortilla and invited Aziraphale into the post-coital chimichanga. Aziraphale slid his hands around Crowley’s waist and scooted in. They ended up in a seated spooning type arrangement after a bit of spatial negotiation, and Crowley was thrilled to be a teaspoon in this flatware drawer.

Aziraphale kissed the side of his neck. “Did you enjoy that?”

Crowley whipped around to level him with an unimpressed stare. “M’sorry, did you not hear me yowling like a dying fuckin’ cat in an iron maiden?”

Aziraphale giggled. “A very fair point.”

“Still wanna take care of you,” Crowley persisted. He was good at that, just bird-dogging something until he got what he wanted.

“I think *I’m* taking care of *you* at the moment. That looked like an experience that will require recovery,” Aziraphale snarked in that bitchy tone that made Crowley want to climb him like a tree.

“Alright, old man, I’m not quite that bad. I can go for round three. Or round two-point-five?”

“I am not old!” Aziraphale protested.

“You are. Older’n me, cradlerobber.”

“Oh, please.”

Crowley feigned innocence. “Here I am, the precocious ingénue...”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Is this grooming?” He speculated aloud. “Is this what grooming looks like? Are you grooming me right now?”

Aziraphale rolled his eyes at Crowley’s dramatics. “Yes. I lured you, an adult man with a career, into my home with the promise of breakfast so that I could do terrible, nefarious things to you.”

“He admits it!” Crowley cried out and pointed an accusatory finger.

Aziraphale waved it off fondly. “Hush.”

“What kind of terrible, nefarious things you thinkin’?” Crowley asked next, curious to hear what sort of delightful perversion Aziraphale might spring on him next.

Aziraphale merely sniffed, though, and gave Crowley an assessing once-over. “I’m not sure you’re up for them at the moment. They’re rather athletic.”

Now, he definitely couldn’t let *that* go uninterrogated. “Oh, do tell.”

“Well, first I would retire to the bedroom.”

“You kinky fuckin’ pervert,” Crowley grinned and poked him in the ribs.

Aziraphale laughed him off. “Scandalous, I know.”

“How do you live with yourself?”

“Then...” Aziraphale paused to ensure Crowley would present no further interruptions. “Then I would make you undress me.”

“You have my attention.” His *complete* and undivided attention.

“Mmhm,” Aziraphale nodded. “And then I would lay you out on my bed.”

“I like where this is headed.”

“I would make you open yourself up again, to be certain you’re ready for me, and so I could watch.”

“Oh,” was all Crowley could give in response. That low heat began creeping into his belly again. Aziraphale might be the death of him, and he’d die a happy man, boneless and sated.

“Mm. And then, once you have worked yourself up, once you’re begging me for it, I would pin you to the mattress and take you slowly. At least at first.”

“Hnnngk.”

“Do you feel groomed?” Aziraphale grinned like the cheeky little fuck he was.

Crowley snorted at having his joke turned back on him, but nevertheless wanted to get moving on Aziraphale’s plan ASAP. “Yeah, it worked. Take me to bed?” he asked with his best puppy dog eyes.

“With pleasure,” Aziraphale said and then, in a devastating display of raw strength, *scooped Crowley up like a bride* and lifted them both from the sofa like it was nothing. Crowley was stunned into horniness. The knit blanket slipped to the floor as he wrapped both arms around Aziraphale’s neck and began sucking kisses above his collar.

Aziraphale deposited Crowley onto his bed carefully, seated at the edge, and stood between his spread knees.

“Now I want you to remove my clothes.”

Crowley sucked in a sharp, small breath of apprehension and raised his twitchy hands to Aziraphale’s neck to begin picking apart his neat plaid bow tie. His gaze flitted between the task at hand and Aziraphale’s face. The man was staring.

“You have the most beautiful eyes,” Aziraphale murmured as he watched Crowley work. The intensity of his gaze made Crowley feel like a raw nerve.

The knot slipped loose, and Crowley pulled it from around Aziraphale’s collar before beginning to work on the small buttons dotting the front of his waistcoat. The man wore an actual waistcoat like a Victorian gentleman. It was so wildly endearing in a way that Crowley hadn’t anticipated.

“They’re such a light brown that they’re almost gold,” Aziraphale continued, tilting his head as if to assess Crowley better. To study him, like he might make a sketch later from memory.

Crowley’s trembling hands worked down the line buttons of Aziraphale’s light blue cotton shirt next, then gently took each cuffed wrist that Aziraphale offered in hand to unfasten those as well.

“Sometimes they catch the light just so and look like honey.” Aziraphale’s fond appraisal made Crowley’s insides do flips.

Crowley pushed the waistcoat and shirt off Aziraphale’s shoulders and down his arms.

“You’re doing so well for me right now,” he praised, then saw Crowley’s momentary hesitation over the clothes he held lightly, looking unsure of what to do and worrying his lower lip between his teeth. “Put mine on the nightstand, please.”

Crowley nodded and set the garments aside with near reverence, ensuring they wouldn’t crease up. His hands were outright shaking as he moved down to Aziraphale’s belt and trousers, but he carefully unfastened those as well and set them aside.

“You have the most charming freckles.”

“Face sprinkles,” Crowley joked offhandedly, and that pulled a huff of laughter from Aziraphale.

“They’re sprinkled all over, not only on your face.” Aziraphale smiled and trailed his hands over Crowley’s shoulders and down his arms, following the freckled path to his fine-boned wrists.

They met hands at the waistband of Aziraphale’s underwear and pushed them down together.

“Oh Jesus, fuck.”

Had Crowley already seen what Aziraphale was packing? Yes, of course he’d seen it. He had photographic evidence. Hell, he’d had that cock down his throat that very morning in the library. And yet, from this angle, with Aziraphale looming above him and his very, very hard dick precisely at eye level... *holy shit*.

“Fuck, Daddy, *please* can I?”

“Oh, sweet boy. As much as I would love that, I do believe that the plan we agreed to involved you putting on a show for me next,” Aziraphale said as he produced another bottle of lube from the nightstand and presented it to Crowley.

Crowley made a frustrated whine at the denial.

“Be a good boy for me, now,” Aziraphale urged and shook the bottle.

Crowley pouted, but plucked the bottle away, regardless.

“You wanna watch me open m’self up for you, Daddy?”

“Very much, my dear.”

Crowley scooted back on the bed to make space to work, then spread his legs so wide as to be nothing short of obscene. Aziraphale followed, shuffling on his knees, gaze ravenously locked on Crowley’s body as he moved.

Crowley knew how to put on a good show. He wanted to *shitwreck* Aziraphale’s self-control.

He popped the cap on the bottle with a little smirk and dripped lube on his first finger (and his abs, by “accident”). He lifted a leg and reached underneath to swirl that finger around his entrance. It was still so sensitive from Aziraphale’s efforts earlier.

“Oh, Daddy, *fuck*, that feels so good,” Crowley moaned, only a little performatively, as he dropped his head back to the mattress and slowly breached himself and sunk a finger into his hole. He was still open and easy from earlier, so it didn’t take much coaxing.

“Tell me, sweet boy,” Aziraphale encouraged. He still sounded far too composed for Crowley’s liking. *Time to up the ante.*

“Mmm. Like the stretch, feels nice. Like you watchin’ me fuck myself open for you. That’s dirty as hell. It’s not... Not enough though,” Crowley gasped as his finger just barely brushed his prostate and he bucked his hips. He didn’t have a good angle to reach it properly.

“Oh?” Aziraphale asked with a tilt of his head.

“Nuh-uh. Need more, wanna feel full. Need your cock inside me, Daddy.”

“Another finger, first.”

“Mnh. Yes, Daddy,” Crowley agreed and sunk a second finger on the next in stroke.

“How does that feel, dear heart?”

Crowley would like to hear those pet names for the rest of his life. They absolutely burned him up inside.

“God, better. But still...”

“Still not enough?”

“Nuh uh.”

Aziraphale *tisk*ed and said, “Poor thing.”

“Need you,” Crowley whined petulantly and rolled his hips against his hand.

“Soon, my dear. One more finger?”

“*Mnnnh*, yes, Daddy,” Crowley obeyed and added his ring finger as well. He bemoaned the fact that his fingers weren’t nearly as thick as Aziraphale’s, and went as deep as he could reach, trying to make up for it.

“You look exquisite like this,” Aziraphale praised as he reached out to stroke a hand up the inside of Crowley’s trembling thigh.

“M’ready now, see?” Crowley said and bucked his hips again as all three fingers plunged deep as he could get them.

“Good Lord,” Aziraphale muttered under his breath as his eyes snapped down to focus on Crowley’s hand. His grip on Crowley’s upper thigh tightened.

“Come on, Daddy. Please?” Crowley emphasized with another filthy roll of his hips.

“Fuck,” Aziraphale whispered, with feeling. Crowley was immensely pleased to reduce him to swearing once more.

“Exactly,” Crowley agreed as he watched Aziraphale’s gaze drift back up his body as he leaned forward to support his weight on both hands.

“Can I touch you?”

“Fuck yes you can.”

Aziraphale crawled over Crowley and captured his lips in a slow, deep kiss. Crowley withdrew his fingers and cast about for the washcloth to clean off, but Aziraphale grabbed it for him from somewhere on the bed. Crowley didn't have the presence of mind to track that sort of shit. Who has the time to keep up with the location of things with a gorgeous man about to fuck you senseless?

Crowley grabbed Aziraphale's shoulders to pull him closer, craving the skin-to-skin press of their chests together and the solid weight crushing him into the mattress. Aziraphale let himself be dragged down, and Crowley whined when they finally touched. He ground up into Aziraphale's belly, feeling desperate for friction against his cock.

Aziraphale broke their kiss to gasp for air and Crowley took the opportunity to nip and kiss up his neck toward his ear, where he whispered, hot and low, “Fuck me, Daddy.”

Aziraphale groaned and grabbed at Crowley's thigh, pulling his leg up and pressing it into his chest. Crowley helped speed things up by squirming a hand between them to guide Aziraphale's cock where he wanted it.

“Mm, not so quickly, my dear. We have all night. I want to take my time with you,” Aziraphale said and reached for the nightstand again to grab a condom. He tore open the packet with his teeth and made quick work of rolling it on, then grabbed for the lube to slick up his cock. He tossed the bottle aside and positioned himself.

Crowley made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat and tried to push down on Aziraphale's cock. Aziraphale just laughed at his impatience and grabbed his waist to still him. “Stop that, I said we're going slowly, so be a good boy and behave.”

Fortunately, he didn't have to wait much longer. Crowley felt a blunt pressure at his entrance and shivered in anticipation of the stretch.

Aziraphale pressed his hips forward slowly—so very, very, glacially fucking *slowly* that Crowley wanted to tear his hair out.

“Fuck, Angel, ya gotta move faster, m'not gonna break.”

“I'm not doing this for you, sweetheart. This is for me. You feel incredible and I—” Aziraphale broke off with a low, rumbling noise in his chest in response to Crowley being a little shit and clenching up tight around him.

“You're playing dirty pool, darling,” Aziraphale admonished lightly.

“Yeah? Wanna see if we can get the balls in the pocket too?” Crowley was proud of himself for being able to make that zinger while Aziraphale was trying to take deep core samples with his dick.

Unfortunately, his impromptu comedy routine caused Aziraphale to stall out his progress in a burst of laughter. That was exactly what Crowley didn't want, dammit!

“No no no, keep going! I'll stop being funny, promise, just get in me for fuck's sake,” Crowley pleaded through his own mirth and wrapped his legs around Aziraphale to prod him deeper with his

heels.

Aziraphale collected himself after a moment and started moving again, *thank Christ*. He lowered himself to connect their lips again and swallowed Crowley's moans as the cock inside him finally bottomed out.

When they broke apart, Crowley rolled his hips to eke out just a bit more of that unbearably full feeling. "Fuck, you feel good too, Daddy," he whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Crowley bit his lip and nodded. "Move. Please? Fuck me. Want it."

Aziraphale made another one of those strangely sexy rumbling noises and pulled most of the way out, slow and even, clearly savoring the friction and drag. The next thrust kept the same rhythm. Crowley responded eagerly, drawing Aziraphale in for another kiss, moaning and opening up easily to let him slip his tongue inside. Aziraphale obliged happily, swallowing every little whine and whimper Crowley made while he fucked him. When they parted for breath, Aziraphale moved to kiss his jawline, his neck, and his collarbones as Crowley tilted his head to offer himself to the onslaught, oh-so-very-willingly.

Crowley made an embarrassing whining noise when Aziraphale sucked a dark mark on his throat, one that almost definitely would require no explanation to the casual observer. "Nat is gonna give me so much hell for that tomorrow," he laughed as Aziraphale pulled away to admire his work.

"Good. Tell her to call me if she wants any further details."

"Pretty sure she'd rather put rocks in her pockets and walk into the sea—oh!" Crowley's eyes widened near-comically as a sharp spark of pleasure tingled through his pelvis.

"Did I find the spot?"

"Fuck fuck fuck, shit, fuck, yes, again, there!"

"Here, lift up for a moment," Aziraphale said and slid a pillow under Crowley's hips when he complied. "There we go, good boy. Now I should be able to..."

Oh, he was *definitely* able to. With the new angle, Aziraphale was unerringly dragging the head of his cock along Crowley's prostate with every thrust, and Crowley *fell the fuck apart*.

"Daddy, harder, *please*," Crowley said, part demand, part plea, clinging desperately to Aziraphale's biceps, his legs wrapped tighter around his waist, urging him again to keep moving.

"You just can't get enough, can you, sweetheart?" Aziraphale said, unrepentant in his smugness, clearly feeling quite pleased that he was reducing Crowley's smart ass to a moaning mess, whimpering and begging to be fucked.

For his part, Crowley could only whine in reply. Fortunately, his incoherent whining seemed to do the trick, because Aziraphale began fucking him in earnest, properly snapping his hips, though only fractionally faster than before. Even better, though, was the hand that Aziraphale wrapped around Crowley's neglected cock.

“Hnnngk,” was the best Crowley could do as Aziraphale began stroking him in time with his thrusts.

“There you go, good boy. Does that feel good?”

Crowley nodded frantically as he felt honest-to-God tears spring to his eyes from the intensity of all that stimulation at once.

“Mnh, Da-daddy m’gonna…” Crowley began to say, but a particularly pointed thrust and Aziraphale’s hand gliding over the head of his cock took language right out of his arsenal.

“Hm?”

“Can I? Can I please?” He tried again, increasingly desperate, as he felt the tension of an impending orgasm building in his core.

“Can you what, sweetheart?” Aziraphale asked, and Crowley would have snarked right back if he were capable.

Instead, all he could gasp out was: “Come. Gonna—can I? Can’t—I can’t hold it!”

“You can,” Aziraphale insisted firmly through gritted teeth.

Crowley felt near to sobbing from the pent-up frustration. “I can’t, I can’t. Please, Daddy, let me come.”

“Just a little more, baby boy,” Aziraphale assured him, as if that pet name wasn’t gonna shitwreck Crowley even more.

The klaxons in Crowley’s mind were wailing, and so was he. *Baby boy?!*

Aziraphale, praise be unto him, stopped stroking his dick and gripped him tight around the base, which was some expert timing because Crowley was fucking mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and probably financially devastated by *baby boy*.

Aziraphale also picked up the pace of his thrusts, chasing his own climax. Crowley’s looming orgasm had abated just enough to renew his linguistic faculties, so he thought he’d help Aziraphale along by pulling out all the filthiest, porniest dirty talk he could muster.

“Fuck yes, Daddy. *Mmnh*. Been such a good boy for you, huh? Haven’t I? Your good boy. You gonna come deep inside me? Wanna fill your good boy all the way up?”

Aziraphale groaned.

“You feel so—ah—so fucking good in me, fuck you’re so goddamn big. Oh! L-love the way you fuck me, Daddy.”

That strategy clearly worked, because Aziraphale’s rhythm became relentless as he began stroking Crowley’s cock again. Crowley was mindlessly chanting “Daddy, please” between the little *ah, ah, ah!* noises forced out of him.

“Come for me, sweet thing,” Aziraphale grunted, obviously at the end of his rope as well. “Let go, I’ve got you.”

And oh, did he ever come. The tension that had been slowly coiling in his belly finally sprang as he keened, high and loud. Crowley's entire body went taut, arching toward Aziraphale and spasming, and then suddenly curling inward reflexively as his orgasm slammed into him. The white heat between his hips raced out across his entire body, his aching cock spilled over Aziraphale's fist. His thighs quaked, his fucking *hair follicles tingled*. Does that ever happen? Well, it did.

Aziraphale was apparently not prepared to feel Crowley clench up around him, because he was not far behind, rutting wildly and in stark contrast to his cool, controlled demeanor of earlier. His breath hitched. His rhythm broke apart. Crowley began whining with oversensitivity, so Aziraphale released the grip around his spent dick and instead grabbed both of his thighs, pressing them into his chest and giving him the pounding of his life.

Crowley, wiped out and depleted as he was, could do little more than hold on tight and try to ride out Aziraphale's sudden enthusiasm. His fingers dug in to Aziraphale's shoulders on instinct, trying to ground himself against the mattress and the onslaught. It wasn't much of a hardship, admittedly, to have Aziraphale gasping in his ear while he absolutely railed Crowley into the mattress. Fuck, he was gonna feel that later.

It didn't take long for Aziraphale's pace to waver, his hips stuttering and his face pinching up in telltale signs of his peak.

"Fuck yeah, come inside me, Daddy. Please, please, please," Crowley begged, breathless and high, as he put all his remaining energy into clenching up tight.

Aziraphale came with a grunt, his arms trembling where they pressed Crowley's legs back, his cock pulsing hard and hot. Aziraphale made a few more weak thrusts as he worked through his orgasm, then finally rolled to the side and pulled out in the same motion. He collapsed onto his back with a groan, chest heaving. Crowley found it adorably thoughtful that he reserved enough brain cells to not just collapse *in situ*.

"Ho. Lee. Fuck. Oh, my—what did we even... I just..." Crowley rambled breathlessly, wiping a hand down his face, his heart still pounding in his ears.

Aziraphale flopped his head over to the side to look at him, grinning and sweaty-faced, "That was excellent."

"That was fuckin'—" Crowley lifted his noodly arms up to mime explosions with his hands. He made the noises and everything. "Transcendent."

Aziraphale giggled. "I am very glad."

"What 'bout you? Good?" Crowley asked. He was pretty sure he knew the answer, but it never hurt to ask. Plus, he liked hearing Aziraphale say nice things about him, call it a character flaw.

Aziraphale pondered his answer for a moment. "Mm. Transcendent is pretty accurate, actually."

"Awww, come on! Sing my praises!" Crowley goaded him, rolling over to poke Aziraphale in his side.

"Stop that!" Aziraphale batted his hands away, then grabbed his wrists and drew Crowley in close. "Sing your praises, hm?"

Their bodies were sweaty and sticking together, but Crowley couldn't care less at that moment. He was still giddy from the endorphins of a frankly mind blowing fuck. He looped an arm over Aziraphale's waist and squeezed, then laid his head on his shoulder.

"Mmm. Lemme hear it. Gimme some of that poetry I know you've got in ya."

"You were... exquisitely sexy. You make the most captivating little noises when I'm pleasuring you, sounds that I would like to hear over and over again, if you'd let me. I'd never tire of the moans and gasps you make when I'm inside you. They're almost as good as the expressions that cross your face when you're being held on the edge, like you'd do anything to finish. Do anything *for me*. It's—it's something else, really. Not to mention your dangerously filthy mouth. Good Lord, what was that bit about... Ah..."

"You wanna fill your good boy all the way up with your cum?" Crowley recalled with a smirk. He felt unbearably smug. Yeah, that line was pretty inspired, he thought. Like a heat-seeking missile of horniness targeted right at Aziraphale's cock.

"Yes, that. That was singularly filthy, my dear."

Crowley tilted his face up and gave Aziraphale a Cheshire grin. "Mmm, wanna breed me, Daddy?"

Aziraphale shot him a stern look that nevertheless quivered around the edges with a smile. "Much though I would love to, I do believe that you have exhausted me for the foreseeable future. Would that I were a much younger man."

Crowley laughed and agreed, and melted out into a boneless puddle once more.

"Shall we clean up?" Aziraphale asked after a pause to catch their breath. Ever the mindful gentleman, he was always looking out for Crowley's comfort.

"Jesus, yeah, I'm a fuckin' wreck," Crowley said as he glanced down to the mess on his belly and grimaced. "Shower?"

"Shower," Aziraphale agreed and mustered the energy to pull them both off the bed and toward the bathroom.

After two quick, perfunctory turns through the water, mostly because Aziraphale's shower wasn't nearly big enough for two grown men to have some kind of sexy fanfic-esque shower scene where they rubbed each other down slowly and escalated to blow jobs, much to Crowley's chagrin, they landed back on the bed to settle in for the night, exhausted but clean. Crowley had been the last out of the bathroom due to his extensive hair detangling needs, so he emerged to find Aziraphale already tucked in.

"You wear actual pajamas to bed, of course you do," Crowley said as he stopped to take in the gloriously dorky plaid collared shirt Aziraphale chose as sleepwear.

"That's because I have class, darling. I don't sleep in hot pants and belly shirts."

Crowley made a scandalized noise and looked down at his nighttime attire. It was cute as fuck, if you asked him. The little black shorts made his ass look amazing. "It's sexy!"

"It is, but there is no way that you sleep tarted up like that at home," Aziraphale said dryly.

“Oh, see if I dress up for you again, mister!” Crowley threatened, as he slid onto the bed.

Aziraphale held up the duvet to let him in. “No, no, carry on. I do like it, it’s very you.”

“Sounds like a backhanded compliment if I ever heard one,” Crowley grouched and settled in.

“Mm, no. I really do like it. It leaves plenty of skin to touch,” Aziraphale mumbled as he skated a hand across Crowley’s waist and dragged him closer. “But you don’t have to dress up for me, darling.”

“Hmmp.”

Aziraphale laughed and kissed Crowley on the forehead, then bundled him against his chest, front to front. Crowley idly ran his fingers through Aziraphale’s chest hair.

“Ready to sleep?” Aziraphale asked, and the sound rumbled through Crowley in a funny way that made him feel sleepy. Sleepy and... Safe? Weird.

“Mmmyeah. Oh! Gotta plug in my—” Crowley began to roll away when he remembered he should probably charge his phone. However, Aziraphale tightened his grip and held him in place, tucked under Aziraphale’s chin.

“I already got your phone. It’s plugged in on the nightstand on your side.”

Your side.

It probably didn’t mean anything, really, but Crowley had this damnable tendency to read way too far into things like the sickening romantic he was. He got a warm fuzzy feeling from the idea of having *a side of the bed* across from this ridiculous man that wore proper pajamas to bed and called him a good boy and made him come so hard it gave him a headache.

“Sleep in tomorrow?” Crowley mumbled, feeling the exhaustion of a long day setting in.

“Sounds lovely. I turned my alarm off, so we can sleep as long as we like.”

Crowley nodded slowly. He never had an alarm set for weekends anyway, so he didn’t even need to check. “Cuddle ‘til I fall asleep?” he asked through a yawn.

“Absolutely, my dear,” Aziraphale said and kissed him again, this time on his still-damp hair.

“Good night.”

Crowley tipped his head back and kissed Aziraphale’s lips one more time, then tucked himself back into his chest.

When he fell asleep minutes later, he slept deep and dreamless to the sounds of Aziraphale’s slow, even breathing, wrapped in his warmth. It was bliss.

Aziraphale decided to turn the interview away from Crowley's career for a bit, just to get a feel for the man behind the physical achievements. "So, what do you do when you aren't climbing?"

Crowley looked properly confused. He squinted like he suspected it was a trick question. "How d'you mean?"

"In your free time," Aziraphale clarified, keeping his tone casual.

It didn't seem to help much. Crowley still looked perplexed. "Oh. Uhh... Not much? Mostly prep for, well, for climbing. Planning trips, maintaining gear, scheduling, handling media stuff. I mean, Nat and Newt do a ton, and I'm super grateful for that, but I still have to invest a lot of my time into things ancillary to hauling myself up mountains for money."

He shrugged, but it looked tired. Worn through at the edges and seams.

Aziraphale nodded slowly, trying not to relate too hard to a man whose only drive was his career. "It sounds like you've made that the singular focus of your life."

Crowley shrugged again, this one sharper. "I mean... Yeah. Kinda have to."

"You must have other hobbies or...?" Aziraphale prompted, gentler this time.

Crowley huffed a laugh that didn't reach his eyes. "Not really. That's... that probably pretty fuckin' sad or whatever, I'm sure. Hell, it's depressing just to say it out loud."

"No, no. It's not—" Aziraphale tried to correct course, sensing the edge in his voice, but Crowley waved it off with a flick of his hand.

"Nah, you don't have to do that." His smile was lopsided and a little hollow. "I get it. It's just—look, there are certain sacrifices that you gotta make to do this. That is an inevitability. So stuff like hobbies and spare time and family and relationships and domesticity, all that? That all goes right out the window."

He said it like a fact. Like it was a rule of physics. Not cruel or bitter, just final.

Too relatable. Aziraphale tried not to let that hit too close to home. "How do you feel about that?" he asked softly.

Crowley shifted in his seat. His leg bounced once, then stilled. "I—I don't feel any way about it, it just is."

There was a beat of silence where Aziraphale let him breathe. Then:

"But do you not want—"

"What I want doesn't matter," Crowley interjected firmly.

His tone was sharp, but not angry. Aziraphale could see it in the tightness of his jaw and the slight twitch in his fingers. There was almost certainly more there. Aziraphale didn't want to accept that answer, despite the steely look that told him he was going to push Crowley into an uncomfortable place, maybe even another one of those famous tantrums.

"Doesn't it?" Aziraphale asked, quiet and genuine.

Chapter End Notes

 **Join us on the [Belayed Gratification Discord Server](#)** for early notice of fic updates, WIPs of the illustrations as I work on them (server members see 'em first!) wild theories and speculation, pictures of rocks, an archive of the illustrations for this story, and silly conversation with other weirdos and degenerates, because that is absolutely a thing that we all needed.

Also catch me on:

[Tumblr](#) (RECENTLY UNBANNED!)

[Bluesky](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Xitter](#)

Abseil

Chapter Summary

The weekend-long fuck fest concludes. Nat meddles. Aziraphale has "a massive girthy hog."

Chapter Notes

I've had a few folks comment with some confusion about the interview scenes at the end of each chapter, so perhaps a clarification is in order in case you are perplexed, too!

! The interview scenes at the end of each chapter are flashbacks to the interview that already happened. We are seeing Crowley's interview from Hand Hold (Chapter 4 by AO3 count) in a piecemeal fashion, as each section of the interview relates to the development of their relationship.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The morning after, in the small hours when the pre-dawn sky was still navy blue, Aziraphale woke suddenly, jolted into awareness by his brain's desperate realization that *the alarm hadn't gone off. Panic!* Fortunately, his sleep fugue didn't last long; rolling over and seeing Crowley's nest of red hair peeking over the edge of the duvet dispelled it handily. Aziraphale grinned to himself as he relaxed from his vigilance.

Crowley had been a surprisingly enthusiastic cuddler the day before, so Aziraphale took a calculated risk and scooted gingerly toward him, hopefully quiet enough not to disturb the other man's sleep. He had a feeling that Crowley was a deep sleeper, based on the hard nap he'd taken in the library across Aziraphale's lap. Which he found *adorable*, by the way.

Honestly, he found most of Crowley to be adorable in the strangest way. Was it odd to find a forty-something so... cute? The man was a pure babygirl, though Aziraphale knew better than to say as much to his face. Crowley obviously put a lot of effort into his dour-and-grumpy demeanor that he carried around like a shield, warding against interlopers who might dare to want to know him better.

For his part, Aziraphale took a silly sense of pride in beating past that defense. Crowley was, as far as he could tell, a genuinely kind and good person, despite his insistence otherwise. Tack that on to his razor-sharp sense of humor, his viciously quick mind, his debilitatingly charming crooked smile, and *his entire stupid handsome face*, Crowley was someone that Aziraphale could easily see himself falling in love with. Like, for the long haul.

Ah, there lies the rub.

For all of Crowley's many, many positive attributes, he was clearly not a creature of commitment. Painfully so. He'd made as much very clear during his interview. Hell, Aziraphale had it on film! A shame, really.

But, Aziraphale told himself firmly, the thing they had, whatever it was, would be enough. It had to be. There was literally no other option. Aziraphale should be grateful to get any part of him at all. He could make it work—a fling with some lively companionship and many spectacular orgasms. What more could he ask for?



Crowley was laying on his side when Aziraphale spooned up to his back and slipped his arm through the gap between Crowley's elbow and his waist, cradling loosely around his chest. In his sleep, Crowley cuddled back into the cradle of Aziraphale's body. He'd been so long without a partner to share his bed that it was nearly intoxicating, that feeling of having someone skin-to-skin.

Sure, Maggie was a hugger, and Aziraphale was always grateful for her easy physical affection, but it hardly scratched the itch like he needed. Did Crowley hug? He couldn't imagine Crowley hugging anyone, standoffish as he tried to appear. And yet here he was, trying to wear Aziraphale like a Tauntaun, at least in his sleep.

Aziraphale figured he could probably swear off hugging for the rest of his life, though, so long as he was still having sex like they did the day before. Because, *wow*, Crowley was really something else, leagues away from all of Aziraphale's previous partners. Aziraphale had spent a lot of time wondering whether the type of sex that people wrote about in romance novels or that you saw in

movies was just that, a fiction. Some far-off ideal meant for two-dimensional characters, but never for real people. Or maybe just never for him?

Not that his previous partners had been *bad* in bed. Far from it. Most had been wonderful, giving, enthusiastic, sexy, and on and on.

But...

Aziraphale couldn't help but notice the incongruities between how people described sex and his own lived experience. There was never any vavoom for him. It was *good* but never great. It was fun, but never mind-blowing. It was satisfying, but never... Whatever they had done yesterday, which Aziraphale had felt in his bones. No, not that bone. Well, yes, also that bone, but the *entendre* is probably not what the author of Aziraphale's inner voice intended you to take away from this.

The point was that Aziraphale had always sensed something missing in his connection with his sexual partners of eras bygone. Not so with Crowley. And frankly, it was a little unsettling how well they had meshed together in the common goal of pleasure. Aziraphale was far too old and jaded and world-weary to believe in anything as soppy as *soul mates*; that was a fool's errand, but damn if his silly little romantic's heart wasn't whispering it frantically at him like a school kid trying to pass a note in class.

Crowley had been...

Ah, were there even words to describe it?

Gorgeous. Sexy. Filthy. Graceful. Devious. Teasing. Submissive. Bratty. Demanding. Breathless. Exhilarating. Panting. Whining. Moaning. Coming. Over and over again.

Aziraphale's traitorous cock stirred in remembrance, and he steadfastly tried to ignore it. He wasn't even sure at this point that he could go another round this soon. He was but a man.

A man plastered chest to back with another man who, despite their earliest misgivings, turned out to be the most delightful surprise. With the most delightful ass. Pressed right into Aziraphale's crotch.

Crowley shifted a bit in his sleep with a low murmur and *wiggled his hips*, the bastard. Aziraphale bit down harshly on his lip to distract himself, but to no avail. Crowley scratched at his nose and wiggled again, a teasing half-grind that wasn't nearly enough to be a conscious overture, but certainly enough to get Aziraphale's attention moving south. The man was a menace, even in sleep.

Before yesterday, Aziraphale hadn't even thought that marathon sex was something in the cards for him anymore. Crowley, however, had the libido of a nineteen-year-old in a strip club, and the stamina to match. It was honestly confounding. Aziraphale idly wondered if science should study him, as he lazily, and a little guiltily, returned the grind. He wouldn't let it go any further than that, of course, not without Crowley being awake and fully consenting.

Aziraphale had a sneaking suspicion he would be, though, so he settled a little deeper into his pillow, clutched Crowley a little closer, and drifted back into that wonderful half-lucid dreamscape to wait for him to wake.

A couple of hours later, Aziraphale stirred again to the sounds of his bathroom taps squeaking. The bed next to him was empty but still warm, so the deduction as to the noisy culprit was easy, even through the grogginess of his sleep.

Crowley emerged from the bathroom minutes later, tiptoeing through the room and back to the bed in a terrible attempt to be quiet enough to let Aziraphale sleep. Aziraphale smiled and opened his eyes as Crowley rounded the corner of the bedpost.

“You’re awake,” Crowley whispered with a matching smile as he lifted the duvet and climbed back in.

“Mmhm,” Aziraphale hummed and nodded.

Crowley smiled a little wider. “Sleep okay?” He asked, then added with a wince, “I tried to be quiet, sorry.”

Crowley was minty fresh. He’d brushed his teeth just to come back to bed, the charmer.

“Slept very well, thank you.”

“Mm, me too. You wore my ass out last night.”

“Literally and figuratively.”

“Okay, too fuckin’ early for big words, thanks.”

Aziraphale chuckled and leaned forward to press a kiss to Crowley’s forehead, but Crowley subverted him by tilting up to capture his lips in a kiss.

“Oh, I need to brush my teeth, none of that yet!” Aziraphale complained and batted him away, then rolled off the bed to attend to his own ablutions in the bathroom. Two could play at that game.

“Try not to miss me too much while you’re gone. Hurry back,” Crowley teased and struck a caricature of a seductive pose, sprawled diagonally across the bed with his head propped up on one hand and the other lying between his splayed legs. Aziraphale made an exasperated noise as he stepped into the bathroom, and Crowley dissolved into a cackle.

He brushed his teeth in the dark, unprepared for the harsh fluorescent lights in his bathroom, and went in extra for a quick rinse of mouthwash because he was a *gentleman*. He re-emerged into the bedroom scant minutes later to find Crowley lying on his stomach, those absurd little shorts riding up over the curve of his ass, his feet swaying back and forth slowly. Were it not for the ravenous look he was giving Aziraphale, he’d think Crowley was about to pull out a little notebook and a gel pen and start writing about his day. *Dear diary, today my tight little ass nearly killed a man.*

“Didn’t even really need ya to brush your teeth for what I want to do to you, but m’glad you did anyway,” Crowley said in a low, even voice, entirely contrary to his earlier teasing lilt.

“Oh?” Aziraphale said as he approached and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Yeah,” Crowley nodded slowly, hypnotically, and pushed up onto his palms, then sat back on his heels, “my plan was just to suck you off, but now I can kiss you in the pre-game.”

Crowley's attack on his mouth was a viper strike, springing from his dangerous coil in one fluid movement, launching himself onto Aziraphale, knocking him down flat onto the bed, and biting at his lower lip until Aziraphale gasped. Crowley took immediate advantage of his open mouth to suck on his tongue as he perched atop Aziraphale's hips.

Aziraphale recovered from the sneak attack and wrapped his hands around Crowley's waist, just below the edge of his shirt. Or the scrap of fabric he called a shirt. His skin was soft and warm and smooth, the muscles underneath firm and unyielding, even as they flexed and twitched with his movements. Aziraphale had a wild impulse to find out if he could span Crowley's entire waist with his hands; the man may have been tall, but he was still a waif, relatively speaking.

Crowley broke their kiss with a grin, then began biting a trail of marks down Aziraphale's jaw and neck while his fingers popped buttons on his sleep shirt.

"I want you to know," Crowley said between one particularly harsh suck against Aziraphale's Adam's apple and the next, softer kiss at the hollow of his throat, "that while these PJs are ridiculous, I half expected you to come to bed last night in one of those sleeping gowns like Ebenezer Scrooge. Hat and all."

Aziraphale laughed. "I only wear that on special occasions."

Crowley popped the last button, flicked his shirt open, and kept descending, kissing a trail down Aziraphale's sternum. Aziraphale sucked in a tense breath as Crowley reached his belly.

"Fuckin' love this," Crowley purred as he dragged his fingers up through Aziraphale's chest hair, then back down to his belly and squeezed with both hands and far more enthusiasm than Aziraphale anticipated.

"Do you?" Aziraphale said on a shallow exhale, feeling a little antsy at such direct attention to a part of himself that he didn't care for. Not that he ever lost any sleep over it or anything, he just harbored a little garden-variety insecurity about his body.

"Mmhm," Crowley hummed and rubbed his cheek on Aziraphale's belly like a cat, his eyes hooded and blissful. "You're so fuckin' hot, Angel."

Body insecurity or not, Aziraphale had to admit that having Crowley so openly admire him was a little exhilarating.

"Even with the gut, hm?" Aziraphale asked, his insecurity getting the better of him for a moment. He immediately regretted how it pulled Crowley out of his horny delirium to level him with a bewildered, disapproving stare.

Aziraphale laughed nervously, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

Crowley interrupted quickly. "Angel, you are sexy as fuck, and I don't say shit that I don't mean."

Aziraphale's eyebrows shot up as he and Crowley stared each other down for a beat.

"I mean it. I like how you look. No qualifiers necessary."

Aziraphale nodded, thoroughly chastened but more than a little pleased that Crowley was so emphatic about it. "Okay. Noted."

“Good. Now, can I resume worshiping you, *Daddy*?” Crowley asked and cracked a smile, which made Aziraphale smile, too.

“Be my guest, dear boy.”

Crowley rubbed his other cheek on Aziraphale’s belly one last time, then dipped down to nuzzle at his clothed, half-hard cock.

“Love how big you are, Daddy,” Crowley said with that breathy, dazed timbre back in his voice. He stroked his hand firmly up the underside of Aziraphale’s dick, then rubbed him through his pants with his palm.

“Yeah?”

“Mmhm. Felt so fuckin’ good yesterday, filling me up,” Crowley said through a moan at the memory. His free hand crept up to the waistband of Aziraphale’s pants and tugged once.

“Want me to take those off, then?”

Crowley nodded sluggishly, mouthing aimlessly at Aziraphale’s now fully interested erection.

Aziraphale helped him tug his pants down his thighs, but Crowley stopped there to cup his cock again through the thin fabric of his undershorts. The warmth of his hand made Aziraphale twitch.

“Tell me,” Crowley said, but Aziraphale didn’t catch his meaning.

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me to do it. Please.”

Ah, of course. Crowley’s desire to be told what to do ran deep, apparently. Aziraphale was more than happy to accommodate.

“I want you to be a good boy and suck my cock. Can you do that for me, sweet thing?”

A full-body shudder raced over Crowley. He licked his lips slowly and nodded. “Yes, Daddy.”

Aziraphale helped him push his undershorts down, too, and when his cock sprang free to lie against his belly, Crowley looked like a parched man in a desert seeing an oasis. He rubbed his palm up the underside again, and Aziraphale shivered at the bare contact with his over-hot skin. Crowley shuffled around to position himself comfortably between Aziraphale’s spread legs, then wrapped his fingers around the girth of his cock and squeezed.

Crowley licked his lips once more, then leaned forward to drag a hot stripe up Aziraphale’s length with his tongue. Aziraphale groaned, not only at the sensation but at the way Crowley steadily held his gaze the entire time, looking up coquettishly through his lashes. This man was going to kill him, Aziraphale was sure of it.

Crowley gripped his cock more firmly and started making small kittenish licks around the sensitive head. Aziraphale’s hips twitched when he dipped the tip of his wicked little tongue into the slit, then trailed down to tease at his frenulum.

“You are too good at that, my dear,” Aziraphale praised, and he could hear the shakiness already affecting his voice.

Crowley didn’t respond. Not verbally, at least. Rather, he gave Aziraphale a tiny, mischievous smirk, then opened his mouth wide and swallowed Aziraphale nearly to the root in one swoop. And what a party trick *that* was.

The sudden, intense warmth and suction caused Aziraphale to curl up off the bed involuntarily. A shocked noise wrenched out of his throat as he buried his hand in Crowley’s hair. “Oh! Oh, God.”

Crowley, demon that he was, smiled around his mouthful and wiggled his brows. Aziraphale imagined he’d snark something like, “God wouldn’t approve of this, Angel,” if he wasn’t otherwise occupied with the pace he set, bobbing his head. He made long but quick strokes, sucking Aziraphale’s length to the base and then up all the way to the tip, nearly pulling off each time. His hands held each of Aziraphale’s thighs in tight claw grips, like he was showing off his ability to destroy a man’s higher brain function with his mouth alone. And if the tremor in Aziraphale’s leg and the quiver in his abs were any indication, Crowley was on the mark.

“Oh, oh, ah—right… like that, sweetheart—oh!” Aziraphale was losing focus quickly, reduced to little more than a litany of mindless moans and half-formed phrases.

Crowley did something wicked with his tongue on the next few bobs, pressing hard into the underside of Aziraphale’s cock on the upstroke and swirling around the head before he dove back down. *Did he take a class to learn how to do that?!*

Aziraphale lolled back against a pillow, senseless and panting. His hand was still in Crowley’s hair, but not guiding; he just didn’t have the wherewithal to do anything more than cup his hand there loosely and pray that he survived this onslaught.

It didn’t take long for Crowley to work him up to the edge of what promised to be another spectacular orgasm. The heat building in his belly was becoming unignorable; Crowley’s mouth was so wet and hot, and the suction so tight and perfect.

Aziraphale hazarded a glance down at the man himself, and that proved to be his undoing. Crowley’s pretty mouth, lips swollen red, was stretched wide around the girth of his cock, saliva glistening wet on his chin, his flaming red hair snarled between Aziraphale’s twitching fingers, and an absolutely smitten, lust-drunk haze in his half-lidded golden eyes. It may have been one of the most erotic things Aziraphale had ever been lucky enough to see in person, and it finished him.

He came suddenly, with a sharp moan, spilling hot into Crowley’s eager, filthy mouth. For his part, Crowley looked terribly pleased with himself, humming happily just before Aziraphale screwed his eyes shut and rode out the aftershocks, pulsing on Crowley’s tongue and down his throat.

“Oh, oh god, no more, please, darling,” Aziraphale begged pitifully and tugged at Crowley’s hair. He was still making little licks and kisses all along Aziraphale’s oversensitive skin, and they bordered on painful in their intensity.

Crowley popped off with a wet noise and chuckled. “Got ya good, hm? Feel better?” His voice was a wildly sexy rasp, probably roughed up from the vigorous abuse his throat had just taken. Crowley didn’t seem to mind, though, so Aziraphale didn’t either.

“Hmnn,” was all he could say. His hand slid out of Crowley’s hair and flopped uselessly onto the bed.

“Thank you, Daddy. That was so fucking hot.”

Aziraphale had no idea what Crowley was thanking *him* for, but he didn’t have the coherence to question it. He did, however, manage to crack an eye open just in time to see Crowley wipe his mouth on the back of his hand, pat Aziraphale on his hip, and grin.

“So, what’s for breakfast?”

The remainder of the morning passed far quicker than Aziraphale would have liked. He wouldn’t have minded a bit if Crowley had asked to stay another night. Truth be told, he would have been thrilled.

They chatted aimlessly through breakfast. At first, Crowley insisted that he only needed a cup of coffee, but Aziraphale stuck a reheated waffle from the morning prior on a plate in front of him, and Crowley didn’t argue. He grumbled something about carbs this early in the day making him too sleepy and then took an enormous bite.

“Don’t think I didn’t see that,” Aziraphale said, sliding the syrup across the table.

“M’just being polite,” Crowley mumbled around a mouthful. “Would be rude not to accept.”

Aziraphale rolled his eyes, but his smile was pleased. “You’re welcome, I suppose.”

The conversation didn’t veer into any serious topics. They were too busy talking about whether they’d rather have slightly wet socks for the rest of their lives or never be able to find the cold side of a pillow again. It was a contentious topic.

“M’just saying, soggy feet gets you trench foot,” Crowley said, pointing his fork decisively. “I could figure out a way to get that fuckin’ pillow cold.”

“But you’d still have to flip it every thirty seconds! You’d never sleep again.”

“Mmnh. Sleep is kinda a scam anyway,” Crowley muttered.

Aziraphale gave him a look. “That won’t work on me. You napped in my lap yesterday quite contentedly.”

Crowley hitched one shoulder and smiled. “Didn’t say I was too smart to fall for the scam.”

Crowley speared another bite of waffle, chewing slowly as he watched Aziraphale bustle around the kitchen, methodically tidying away dishes and humming softly under his breath. The domesticity of it felt warm and inviting and comfortable in a way that made Crowley’s chest ache uncomfortably. He pushed a syrup-soaked strawberry around his plate, watching it leave a sweet red smear.

There were two dirty mugs by the sink. A damp dishrag slung over the faucet from washing up after their dinner last night. A spray of crumbs near the toaster, where Crowley had accidentally knocked it with his elbow and caused the catch tray to spill. All the signs of a space used by someone who lived here. Maybe even two someones who lived here. It felt familiar, like the type of place where someone might hope to come back, or where someone might be missed.

He knew he needed to leave—had known it for nearly an hour now, if he was honest—but the desire to stay rooted him in place, stubborn and defiant. Crowley was good at leaving, at ducking out and slipping away before things had the chance to settle too comfortably around him. But here, now, with Aziraphale puttering about and smiling at him over his shoulder, leaving felt absurdly difficult.

Just a few more minutes, he thought, allowing himself a fragile indulgence.

“You alright over there, dear heart?” Aziraphale asked, glancing up with a small smile. He was drying a frying pan, methodical and careful.

Crowley jolted slightly, realizing he’d been staring blankly at his plate. He cleared his throat. “Yeah. M’good. Just... really like your waffles.”

Aziraphale raised an eyebrow, skeptical but amused. “You’ve been dissecting that poor strawberry for the last ten minutes.”

“I’m savoring,” Crowley protested weakly.

“Hmm,” Aziraphale said, and Crowley could practically hear the affectionate disbelief dripping from his voice.

An unhurried beat passed between them. The frying pan clinked gently as it settled into the dish rack, and Aziraphale dried his hands on a tea towel. Crowley shifted in his chair, tugged his leg up into the seat with him, sockless and spindly, and watched Aziraphale’s hands while he worked.

“This s’nice,” Crowley said, so quietly that he wasn’t sure if Aziraphale would hear him. “All this.”

Aziraphale paused mid-fold of the towel. “Isn’t it?”

He came to sit opposite Crowley again. The late morning light slanted through the kitchen window, gilding the edges of his hair and the porcelain rim of his coffee cup.

They sat in silence for a while, not uncomfortable, just... steeped in it like tea. Like a warmth that takes a while to reach all the edges of the cup.

“You’re welcome to stay longer, if you’d like,” Aziraphale said after a moment, his gaze soft.

“There’s no rush. I’ve got a book to finish and a fire I can build. I dare say we’d both benefit from a nap.”

Crowley looked up sharply, like the invitation startled something raw and skittish in him. But it wasn’t rejection that he felt. It was relief, thick and grateful and terrifying.

“You’re not sick of me yet?” he asked, trying for casual, but it came out quieter than he meant.

Aziraphale’s eyes crinkled. “Not even remotely.”

Crowley swallowed hard and nodded, tapping the edge of his fork against the plate. “Good. I, uh. Don’t really want to go yet.”

“Then don’t,” Aziraphale said simply, like it was the easiest decision in the world.

Crowley exhaled through his nose and looked down at his plate again. “Y’know, if I stay much longer, you might have to feed me lunch, too.”

Aziraphale smiled. “You’ll find I’m terribly susceptible to bribery.”

“Oh, yeah?” Crowley asked, finally looking up again. “What’s the going rate?”

Aziraphale leaned forward conspiratorially. “One kiss per sandwich.”

Crowley huffed a laugh. “You drive a hard bargain, Angel. I’ll have to get with my accountant and see if we can reach some sort of agreement.”

Crowley smiled into his coffee and let the moment stretch. Maybe he could stay a few more hours. Maybe they could sit in the library and pretend the world outside didn’t exist, just for today.

The fire crackled gently in the hearth, throwing golden light across the Persian rug and turning the deep green walls of Aziraphale’s library even warmer. The air smelled of firewood and old paper, and Crowley had sunk into one end of the wide chesterfield sofa like a lizard basking on a heated rock.

He’d kicked off his boots, one sockless foot tucked under his thigh, the other dangling just off the edge. A throw blanket was tangled around his waist, half-on-half-off, like he couldn’t decide whether he was staying or fleeing. But the way he leaned his head back against the cushion, eyes closed, hands folded loosely over his stomach—he wasn’t going anywhere.

Aziraphale padded in from the hallway with a tray: two mugs of tea and a tiny stack of shortbread cookies that he’d arranged like a peace offering. He set the tray on the coffee table and nudged one mug toward Crowley with a soft clink of porcelain.

Crowley cracked an eye open. “You’re spoiling me.”

“I absolutely am,” Aziraphale said primly, settling into the other side of the couch with a sigh. “And you deserve it.”

Crowley blinked at him. “Did you hit your head on something while I was in the bathroom?”

Aziraphale chuckled. “Just accept the tea, darling.”

They sipped in companionable silence for a while. Crowley watched the flames flicker in the grate and tried not to think about how disgustingly soft he felt. Aziraphale, for his part, cracked open the battered old paperback he’d been working through for the last week—something with a crumbling spine and too many footnotes—and read while absentmindedly rubbing small circles on Crowley’s knee with his thumb under the blanket.

Crowley wasn't even sure when that started. He just knew that if it stopped, he might scream.

It was the sort of touch that was so easy to slip into, like a warm bath. Just steady and unthinking, as if Aziraphale hadn't even realized that he was doing it. Like Crowley had been effortlessly, unconsciously folded into the category of things that deserved affection without asking.

"You always read the end of the book first?" he asked after a long while, just to hear Aziraphale's voice again.

Aziraphale didn't look up. "Only when I'm worried someone I like is going to die."

Crowley snorted. "Well, spoilers: we all die, eventually."

"That's true. But I like to be emotionally prepared when it happens on the page."

"D'you think that's why some people like stories better'n real life?" Crowley asked, surprising himself. "'Cause you get to peek at the end before you get too attached to some poor fuck that's gonna die in chapter nineteen?"

Aziraphale looked up then, caught slightly off guard. He closed the book slowly and set it on the arm of the sofa. "Perhaps," he admitted. "Though I'm not sure you'd let me get away with that anymore."

Crowley smiled faintly. "No spoilers for me, Angel."

"No," Aziraphale said, voice gentle. "You've made yourself thoroughly unpredictable."

They lapsed into silence again, but it was fuller now. Like something had settled between them that hadn't quite been able to land before.

Crowley turned his face toward Aziraphale's shoulder and mumbled, "Kinda comfy here."

Aziraphale reached over and tugged the blanket higher over both of them, letting his hand rest over Crowley's. Crowley didn't bother trying to twine their fingers together. The pressure of Aziraphale's hand was broad and warm and enough to anchor them both.

"Then stay as long as you'd like."

Crowley's eyes slipped shut. He was starting a terrible habit of napping in this angel's cozy little library. He breathed, long and slow, like he was trying to memorize the feeling of existing in this place. The scent of the fire on the hearth and the old paper in the books all around them. The steady weight of another hand on his. The sound of a fussy, charming, intelligent, funny man who hadn't yet wised up enough to ask him to leave.

As the morning drew to a close, Aziraphale became increasingly reluctant to see Crowley go. He sincerely hoped that they wouldn't be a onetime thing, but Crowley's interview, his explicit statements about not getting into relationships, only having flings, was an obnoxious echo in the soundtrack of his mind. He was heartened, however, to see signs that Crowley, too, seemed hesitant

to go. Unless he was misreading the lingering looks and barrage of new topics to discuss every time a half-beat of silence fell between them, and he didn't think he was.

The morning conversation spilled well into the afternoon. Aziraphale made two more cups of tea just to keep them busy a little while longer, and Crowley accepted without hesitation. That bought them another hour and a long debate about what constituted a sandwich. Crowley was absolutely wrong about tacos being a sandwich, by the way. That was ridiculous.

By the early evening, the weak winter sun was already on its collision course with the horizon. Crowley, who had been lying out on Aziraphale's library sofa and waving his hands in the air while he made several very emphatic points about how all foods were technically a salad, finally sat up and sighed.

"It's gotten so late," he commented and stretched his arms up, high and wide.

The hem of his shirt lifted slightly with the movement, exposing that damnable strip of pale belly and the waistband of his rumpled boxers. Aziraphale resolutely did not stare.

"I suppose it has."

"I should probably head home. Don't wanna overstay my welcome."

"Nonsense. I had a lovely time. I understand, though."

Crowley hummed and fiddled with the hem of his shirt. He contemplated something, Aziraphale couldn't tell what, but finally seemed to make up his mind one awkward minute later. Aziraphale realized that was the only awkward silence they'd had all weekend.

"Alright," he said and slapped his hands on his knees, then stood up, looking entirely too resolved for Aziraphale's liking. "I'm going to head out."

"Of course. Let's get you packed up."

Crowley gathered his things, and Aziraphale walked with him to the front door. Each step felt heavier than it should have. The floorboards creaked like they were protesting, too.

"Thanks for having me over, Angel."

"Any time, my dear."

Crowley looked fidgety, and Aziraphale could read the conflict coming off him in waves, so he decided to put the poor bastard out of his misery. He leaned in close, grabbed him by the waist, and kissed him. Crowley made a muffled noise of surprise before melting into the kiss, dropping his overnight bag on the floor, and wrapping his arms around Aziraphale's neck. His fingers curled tight into the fabric on the back of Aziraphale's shirt like he was trying to anchor himself.

When they broke apart, Crowley sighed happily and pressed their foreheads together. "I had fun."

"Me too."

"Don't wanna go."

"Mm, I don't want you to either."

They kissed again, slow and sweet. It was softer now, a little more lingering.

“Should prolly... be a responsible adult.”

“You should.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Okay. I’m doin’ it.”

Another kiss, brief and chaste.

“I’d ask you to stay, but I should probably work tomorrow, and you are a terrible distraction,” Aziraphale joked. That was a lie. Aziraphale could probably work just fine in the companionable silences that they had shared over the weekend, but he wanted to give Crowley an out so that he didn’t feel pressured to stay. God, did he ever want him to stay, though. He wanted to say it out loud. He wanted to demand it.

“You’re right, you’re right.” Crowley took a deep breath. “Alright, back into the elements.”

They untangled themselves, and Crowley grabbed his duffel bag. They shared one last brief kiss as Aziraphale opened the front door, and they stood at the threshold. The cold air from outside slipped into the space between them like an unwelcome third party.

“See ya later, Angel.”

“Drive safely, my dear.”

Crowley paused for a moment, looking for all the world as if he was going to say something else, but decided better of it. His mouth opened just slightly, then closed again. His jaw flexed like he was chewing on the words. He smiled and gave a little wave as he walked to his car.

Aziraphale stayed in the doorway long enough to watch the headlights sweep the hedge, the taillights disappear down the road, and the silence flood back in. It was certainly long enough to admit that the house already felt colder without him.

And Aziraphale was alone again.

Later that night, a couple of hours after Crowley had returned home, Nat appeared in the doorway to his bedroom, looking smug as fuck, leaned up against the door frame with her arms crossed.

“So...” she began with a knowing grin.

“So?” Crowley echoed.

“How did it go, jackass?”

He sniffed and put on a haughty air. “A lady doesn’t kiss and tell.”

Nat laughed, which, *rude*. “You’re not a lady. If anything, you’re the tramp.”

Crowley mocked offense and wagged a finger at her. “Well now m’really not going to tell you anything.”

“Oh, come on!” Nat tossed her hands up, then approached his bed to sit across from him with a pathetically pleading look on her face. “Let me live vicariously through you.”

Crowley shook his head, taking great satisfaction in denying her the sordid details of his time with Aziraphale. “Go fuck Newt instead.”

“So you two banged it out!” Nat chirped and clapped her hands, but Crowley rolled his eyes at her.

“Of course we did.” Did she think they held hands all day and did crafts together?

Nat cackled. “Finally!”

“What?!”

“Could have cut that unresolved sexual tension with a knife, babe. He wanted your dick from day one,” she said knowingly. He hated it when Nat got all wise and sagely on him. It happened way too often

“Don’t ever talk about my dick again,” he warned her sternly, but Nat was an undeterred little gremlin.

“Okay, can we talk about his?” She tried instead.

“No!”

“I’ll trade for deets about Newt. That thing is like a third le—”

“Stop! No no no, do not want, shut right the fuck up and never mention Newt’s junk to me again.”

“Jealoussssss,” she teased, eyes glinting with mirth at his discomfort. Nat was a cruel mistress.

“Please,” Crowley rebutted, “as if I’d need to be.”

“So what I’m hearing is that your boyfriend rearranged your guts with his massive girthy hog.”

Crowley choked on his next breath and sputtered. “Holy shit, okay, one, gross. You’re gross. Two, not my boyfriend.”

“No?” she asked in perfect disbelief.

“No,” Crowley said firmly.

“But you want him to be.”

“Do I?” Crowley asked, with an eyebrow raised in doubt.

“Why wouldn’t you?” she asked, shaking her head. “He’s great!”

“I don’t have time for that shit, Nat.”

Nat's expression turned stony. Oh, now he was gonna hear it. A patented Anathema Device dressing-down. "Gods above, are you still—you're so stupid sometimes it's a wonder you can tie your shoes."

"My climbing shoes have velcro on them," Crowley pointed out like the smart ass he was, though on second thought, he was probably proving her point. Okay, like the dumb ass he was.

"And now I see why," she sassed. "Why in the fuck would you not wife this man immediately?" Uh oh, her hands were on her hips. This was serious.

Crowley frowned. "With all my free fuckin' time that I have for a relationship? And the traveling? And, you know," he waved a hand around in the air, "my general inability to commit."

She looked at him like he was eating paint chips off the front porch. "You make time, dumb ass. For the right one, you make time. And he travels as much as you do, right? For the films."

"That makes it worse!" Crowley yelped. It did make it worse. Their schedules would never line up. He didn't even have to ask to know. And what kind of life would that be? Who could ever hope to maintain something worthwhile long term with Crowley's schedule?

Nat scoffed at him anyway. "Look, all I'm saying is that you two have been so painfully goddamn obvious from day one, and I think you're a fucking fool if you don't jump all over him and lock it down. Like, yesterday."

"I did jump all over him yesterday," Crowley shot back.

"Oh NOW you wanna spill the tea?"

Crowley huffed at her, but couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up. "I really don't. I'm trying to get you to *woosh* off and leave me alone. Go do witch shit or whatever it is that you do at night."

Nat stared at him for a moment, likely assessing how much more pestering she could do before he actually got mad. "Fine," she said after coming to her conclusion, "but get your head out of your ass. He likes you. You like him. You can figure it out."

"Mhm. Good night Nat," he said dismissively, and waved her away. The last thing he needed was this interrogation about his romantic life to ruin his perfectly good post-dickdown mood.

She sighed the same long-suffering sigh that she had directed at him so many times before and conceded. "Night, Crowley."

Nat finally gave up the ghost and left him alone, muttering something under her breath about "idiots in heat." He didn't bother responding, just listened to the sound of her footsteps retreating up the stairs, the door at the top creaking shut behind her with a solid thunk.

The silence afterward was weirdly loud.

Crowley sat on the edge of his bed for a minute, one knee bouncing, hands curled between them. His room felt colder than it had when he came in. Too big. Too still.

He glanced at the rumpled duvet. The faint scent of Aziraphale still clung to his shirt—tea and cedarwood and something faintly sweet, like almond biscuits.

He flopped backward with a groan and dragged a pillow over his face.

"Fuck me," he muttered.

Crowley flopped onto his bed and cast a hand out to find his phone. He had to tell Aziraphale about this. Well, some of this. He wasn't going to mention *most* of that conversation.

< Aziraphale 

Today•10:22 PM

nat asked me if you had a “massive girthy hog”

i just need you to know that because someone else has to bear this horrible burden with me



Crowley grinned as he hit send, then dropped his phone back onto the duvet and stared at the ceiling. Aziraphale would get a kick out of Nat's filthy mouth, he thought. And he could just conveniently sidestep the rest of their discussion in favor of the fun bits.

His phone chirped a notification at him.

< Aziraphale 

Today•10:25 PM

Aziraphale

What did you say?

nothin. i don't kiss and tell

Aziraphale

Shall I assume that she was not inquiring whether I keep pigs as livestock?

 lmaoooooo

safe assumption yah



Crowley had been pleasantly surprised by Aziraphale's sense of humor. He couldn't handle people who were too serious all the time (perhaps doubly so because he deflected all his feelings into jokes). When they first met, Crowley had incorrectly assumed that he was an over-serious prick with a stick up his ass, but Aziraphale's wit was sharp as a tack once you got past his professional documentarian persona. It was nice.

His messaging app pinged again.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 10:31 PM

Aziraphale

How are you feeling by the way?



That was another thing about Aziraphale that had surprised him: he seemed to care so genuinely and so deeply for everyone around him. He liked to take care of his people. It was sweet. At first, Crowley had been unsure if it was just an air he affected because it made him good at his job—it was easier to get information out of people if they trusted you, after all. But Crowley was apparently just a cynical bastard, and Aziraphale was actually that kind.

Crowley tapped out a response and snickered to himself.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 10:32 PM

you asking me if my asshole has recovered from taking your massive girthy hog???

Aziraphale

That particular wording is rather explicit, isn't it?

yeah, and imagine hearing your little sister saying it to you

anyway im alright. a little sore but its good. we should do that again some time soon



Very soon, with any luck. Crowley hadn't been fucked like that in *years*, and as soon as he was physically capable, he wanted Aziraphale balls-deep in him again.

< Aziraphale 

Today•10:35 PM

Aziraphale

I agree, my dear. I'd love to see you again as soon as possible.



Crowley's traitorous little heart gave a flutter that he summarily ignored.

< Aziraphale 

Today•10:36 PM

Aziraphale

What is the climbing schedule looking like?

i'll have to let you know specifics later when i'm not exhausted buuuuuuuut

Aziraphale

Understandable.

buuuuuuuut i worked out the schedule the other night and we're planning our first road trip for the big climb in late march-ish. should be out there for about a week and hopefully we only need the one trip, but i'm realistic

which means we'll prolly be back out there in mid-april for a second attempt



Crowley definitely would not say no to two camping trips with Aziraphale. Maybe they could finally fuck in a tent. Or in the woods. Or on top of the crag. Okay, maybe not the last one, for logistical reasons.

< Aziraphale 

Today•10:40 PM

Aziraphale

Is it selfish of me to want two trips to see you climb?

a lil bit, but i like that, you devious man

you just wanna look at my ass while i'm scaling the wall huh

Aziraphale

Oh, darling, I want to do so much more than that to your ass, let me assure you.



Aziraphale had been surprisingly enthusiastic in the sack, too. For some reason, Crowley had worked up this image in his mind of Aziraphale as a repressed former church kid, laden with religious guilt, who was only comfortable in missionary with the lights off. How very wrong he had been. No, Aziraphale ate ass like a starved man at a Golden Corral. Crowley had never been so happy to be wrong about something in his entire life.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 10:43 PM

i'll hold you to that you know

Aziraphale

I am counting on it.

are you free next weekend?

Aziraphale

Well, I will have to clear my very busy social calendar.

i appreciate your sacrifice

Aziraphale

Do you want to come over on Friday? We could take the whole weekend.

it's a date, angel



If Crowley had been a smarter man, maybe he would have seen it coming, falling in love with Aziraphale and upending his entire, carefully crafted peaceful existence. Or maybe he did see it coming, and he just chose willful ignorance in the face of something so momentous. It wasn't the first time that he had been a little too cavalier with his future. Reckless, even.

There he was, after all, feeling warm and fuzzy over the man on the other end of that text message thread, planning to spend another weekend together. Planning to go on camping trips together. Planning ahead for an existence that included Aziraphale in it, almost as if it were a foregone conclusion, despite his outward insistence to the contrary—that he couldn't handle a relationship, that his lifestyle didn't suit that kind of commitment, that he didn't want to make the effort.

Despite all that, it sure did seem like Crowley was making a lot of effort.

But he didn't think about it too hard. That was a problem for Future Crowley, and fuck that guy.

He tossed the phone onto the bed, facedown, like he couldn't trust himself to be able to see the screen light up with another notification.

God, he was already counting down to Friday. It was *Sunday*.

That didn't seem casual. It sure as fuck didn't seem like a fling. This was the kind of thing that people looked forward to. The kind of thing that came with toothbrushes bought in two-packs and a shared Saturday Morning Vibes playlist and a key left under the terracotta flower pot to the left of the front door.

Crowley rubbed a hand down his face, then let it flop dramatically onto his chest.

Maybe Nat was right. Maybe he was a dumbass. But he was *a dumbass with plans for Friday*, and that felt like enough.

For now.

[crowley_interview_session3_finalfinalFINAL.mp4]

"This may be a foolish question, but... how do you get back down? After you've climbed to the top." Aziraphale felt silly for even having to ask, but he figured that keeping Crowley talking was always good for the documentary, and he was curious, anyway.

"Well, sometimes you're lucky and there's a path down the backside and you can just drop your rope and walk to the bottom of the crag. Most of the time, though, you either climb back down or your belayer lowers you with the rope. That one is called lowering off. If you do the lowering yourself, it's abseiling."

"Abseiling?"

Why did rock climbing need so many specialized terms? It bordered on the ridiculous, in Aziraphale's opinion.

“Mhm,” Crowley nodded, “when you control your own descent down the rock face, no second person acting as the belayer. Rappelling is the other term.”

“Oh, I know that one!”

“Yeah, that.” Crowley grinned at Aziraphale’s excited recognition.

“Do people do that as a... a sport?” he asked.

“Some people do. Or you use it to get to some place otherwise inaccessible if you’re mountaineering or rock climbing. Search and rescue folks do it, too. It’s just a term for any descent where the person doing the descending is managing the rope themselves—a controlled descent.”

“A sight better than an uncontrolled descent, I’d hazard.”

Crowley laughed. “Yeah, uncontrolled descents are not the preferred option. I’ve done a few of those before, and they are scary as fuck.”

“Were you injured?”

Aziraphale hated to imagine the kind of trouble one could get themselves into, falling like that.

“Some bruises to the ego, yeah. And scrapes and stuff. I’ve gotten pretty banged up, but nothing serious. I’ve honestly been really lucky that I’ve not had any major climbing accidents, especially with how reckless I was back when. These days I’m careful, ‘cause you know what they say,” Crowley trailed off with a wave of his hand.

“What’s that?” Aziraphale prompted.

“There are old climbers and there are bold climbers, but there are no old, bold climbers.”

Crowley glanced away from the camera for a second, then back.

“Doesn’t mean you stop doing the bold shit, though,” he added. “Just means you—hopefully—learn how to do it without dying, first.”

Aziraphale, off-camera, let out a quiet hum. “That sounds like good advice.”

“Yeah. Well. Doesn’t always stick. But I try.”

He didn’t elaborate. There was a flicker in his expression, something reflective and faintly rueful, like he remembered something that he didn’t want to say out loud. It looked suspiciously like vulnerability.

The camera lingered for another breath, catching the faint twitch of Crowley’s mouth as he looked down at his hands without seeing them, then up again with a crooked smile.

“Anyway, controlled descents. Highly recommend.”



Join us on the [Belayed Gratification Discord Server](#) for early notice of fic updates, WIPs of the illustrations as I work on them (server members see 'em first!) wild theories and speculation, pictures of rocks, an archive of the illustrations for this story, and silly conversation with other weirdos and degenerates, because that is absolutely a thing that we all needed.

Also catch me on:

[Tumblr](#) (RECENTLY UNBANNED!)

[Bluesky](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Xitter](#)

Crux

Chapter Summary

Winter passes into Spring. Let the preparation for the Big Climb begin.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for 300+ kudos, 8k+ hits, Jesus Christ, what a ride this has been so far and we aren't even half way there yet.

For those of you who leave comments: I've been pretty good so far about replying to all the comments on each chapter, but I'm coming up on a busy time of year and I've def fallen behind on replying to everyone. If I don't respond to your comment on a chapter pls know that I read it and I love you and I will reply as I can, but if I don't I AM SO SORRY thank you for reading and taking valuable time out of your busy day to leave me a comment, you are a beautiful and majestic butterfly and a light in my life.

⚠ Daddy Kink incoming! Also Breeding Kink! The tags for this fic have been updated accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Crowley and Aziraphale spent the weekends together more often than not through the rest of the winter. Weekends often started with the scent of Aziraphale's increasingly complex breakfasts filling the little kitchen, a stark contrast to Crowley's usual single black coffee. Many nights ended with Crowley's head nestled comfortably in Aziraphale's lap, the soft murmur of a documentary or the turning of a book's pages acting as a familiar lullaby. Crowley even started leaving some of his things on Aziraphale's bedside table when he stayed over—the fast charger he liked to use for his phone, a pump bottle of aloe vera for his hands after climbing, an old quickdraw with a loose gate that he liked to fiddle with mindlessly.

Over Christmas, Crowley went home with Nat and Newt to Casa de la Device, as he always did. Nat's mom was a lovely woman, a superb cook, and a *stone-cold fox*, and he could never resist being relentlessly objectified by that absolute cougar. They had been trying to out-flirt each other for years (all in good fun, of course), to maximize Nat's mortification. She even grabbed a handful of Crowley's ass on Christmas morning and declared it her gift from Santa Claus, the minx that she was. Nat spent the rest of the morning lecturing her own mother about consent while opening gifts and eating tamales, while Crowley cackled.

Aziraphale found it hilarious when Crowley told him about how Mamá Device was determined to eat him alive, thank Christ. Not that he and Aziraphale were formally exclusive or anything. Functionally exclusive, sure, but they had made no agreements about their relationship, whatever it was, into words. No definitions.

Still, Crowley had started accepting Aziraphale's quiet comfort during his restless nights, no longer shying away from the soft hand that would find his arm in the dark. The scent of Aziraphale's old books and the faint bergamot that lingered around him had become something Crowley subconsciously sought out, a surprising anchor in his often-chaotic thoughts. They'd even developed their own shorthand, not unlike Nat and Newt or Maggie and Nina, a glance or a shared smirk communicating entire conversations across a room without saying a word.

Once the weather got too cold for outdoor climbing, Crowley retreated to the centrally heated comfort of the climbing gym for practice. It wasn't quite as good as climbing on a real crag, but the owner of the gym gave him the latitude to set a couple of routes for himself, so he pulled off all the handholds and reset them, making a less-used corner of the climbing wall into a practice space for tricky parts of The Big Climb.

Aziraphale, Maggie, and Nina even came down to the gym to film him there a few times. Crowley took good-natured hell from his fellow regulars about that for *weeks* afterwards. They started calling him Hollywood. The sunglasses he wore while climbing in the gym probably didn't help that (the fluorescent lights in there gave him terrible headaches, okay?!).

As the winter began to thaw into spring, Crowley had gone full feral cabin fever. He was itching to get outside again and climb some rocks.

< Aziraphale 

Today•4:15 PM

angel i am dying

Aziraphale

I promise you that you are not dying.

feels like it tho. the veil is thinning around me. i'm being called to the other side

Aziraphale

I thought you started planning the next camping trip already?

i did but Nat said we can't go until the ground thaws

Aziraphale

Is she wrong?

well no, but i wanna pout about it

Aziraphale

You're very cute when you pout.

am not! 😡😡😡 you take that back! LIES AND SLANDER

Aziraphale

Whatever you say, dear.



They texted daily, nearly all day long, back and forth with memes and silly jokes, innuendo and updates about themselves and their friends. Crowley probably should have been alarmed that he was talking to Aziraphale first thing in the morning and last thing at night, given his self-professed “no commitments” lifestyle, but willful ignorance was a hell of a drug. Aziraphale certainly hadn’t said anything about it, so Crowley didn’t either.

By mid-March, Crowley was crawling out of his skin in anticipation of the properly warm weather season. The first trip out for The Big Climb was only two weeks away at that point, so he could at least channel some of his energy into actual preparations.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 7:56 PM

we need to get you a sleeping pad for your bag

Aziraphale

Oh, I was thinking I would simply share yours again.

dirty man

Aziraphale

But yes, I will go buy one this weekend.

well now hold on a second, you’ve got me seeing the potential here...

Aziraphale

We can scoot them together when we sleep and have double the space without risking rolling off.

Lucy and Ricky style, nice. you planning on rolling around with me in that tent Angel?

Aziraphale

Yes, and possibly out in the woods, too. You’d look good with some leaves in your hair.

i’m gonna hold you to that, Angel

Aziraphale

And I am going to hold you to a tree.

fcukkkkasdhfjks



The plan was this: Aziraphale and Crowley would drive up on Saturday the 15th with as much gear as they could fit in one car to get the campsite prepped and scope out the climbing situation. Nat and Newt would come out on Sunday with the rest of the haul, and they would be camping from the converted back of the van, which had an area to sleep. Nina and Maggie, who were employees who deserved a weekend off, at least in Aziraphale's opinion, would come out on Monday to film and stay with the rest of the group until Thursday. That gave Crowley two days to get ready, and around three-and-a-half days to work on the climb itself. The perfect plan.

Crowley spent that first week actually preparing for the trip. It only took him two days to clean and prep the gear, and then over the weekend he took Aziraphale out to R.E.I. and the climbing shop attached to the gym to buy consumables and a much-needed second sleeping pad.

He spent the next week freaking out. But like, in a totally cool, casual way. Nat was at the end of her rope (ha ha, climbing joke). Newt was avoiding him at all costs, because Newt was a very smart man. And Aziraphale was holding down the threads of his sanity via text message.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 10:22 PM

Aziraphale

You will be fine, my dear.

will i?!?!?!?

Aziraphale

I'm sure of it.

what if i forget how to climb

Aziraphale

Has that ever happened before?

past performance does not indicate future results, Angel

Aziraphale

If I were buying stock for my investment portfolio, I would agree. In this case, however, I think that your sterling record of standing at the bottom of things and then climbing to the top of them may be a reliable benchmark.

what if i jam my hand into a crack and get bit by a spider

Aziraphale

Then we shall pray that it is radioactive, because that would make finishing the climb much, much easier.

and then i could fight crime and shit

Aziraphale

Precisely.



Crowley didn't mention it, but he really was grateful for every time Aziraphale talked him through one of his ridiculous, melodramatic anxiety spirals. Nat was terrible at it, probably intentionally so that Crowley wouldn't come to her with his hyperbolic stress episodes. She would just tell him to put on his big boy panties and figure it out. Aziraphale, though, he would soothe and joke and redirect Crowley's nervous energy into something that, if not productive, was at least not actively harmful to his mental health. That was nice.

< Aziraphale 

Today • 10:33 PM

i could wear the sexy little spandex onesie, too. bet my ass would look phenomenal in that

Aziraphale

It would. What would your superhero name be?

spider-ass

ass-man

Aziraphale

The Wall Crawler

arocknophobia

Aziraphale

The Masked Mountaineer.

sticky fingers

Aziraphale

The Mountain Goat.

oooh i could have a mask with those fucked up sideways demonic goat eyes

Aziraphale

Sure to inspire fear into criminals everywhere.

i'd be unstoppable. wanna be my sidekick? you could be The Documentarian

Aziraphale

Filmmaking is a terrible superpower.

no no you'd have a photographic memory for crime or smth

Aziraphale

Perhaps The Librarian.

encyclopedic knowledge of crime?

Aziraphale

That or I apprehend criminals by throwing the book at them.

...

oh my god

Aziraphale



And just like that, Crowley wasn't anxious anymore. Instead, he was grinning at his phone like an idiot.

Crowley picked Aziraphale up on the Saturday morning of their trip up to the crag, bright and early and still yawning. Aziraphale brought him a thermos of coffee and a good morning kiss when he slid into the passenger's seat and buckled in.

"You brought a sleeping pad this time?" Crowley said slyly, and Aziraphale pursed his lips at him.

"I did," he replied airily, "and I am proud to report that it is with the rest of my things in the trunk."

Crowley grinned. “Good, ‘cause I’m not sharing mine with you again.”

“Oh hush, you,” Aziraphale chastised and slapped him on the biceps.

“Make me,” Crowley countered, and Aziraphale leaned in to kiss him again.

Perfect, they both thought, but neither said it aloud.

The five-hour drive to The Big Climb spot was relaxed and fun with Aziraphale as his co-pilot. He was the official handler of Google Maps for directions and the designated buyer of snacks at gas stations when they stopped to stretch and refill the tank. Their conversation in person was just as easygoing and ridiculous and filled with completely unsubtle flirting as their text thread. Crowley hadn’t had that with any of his other friends with benefits before, and it made co-existing with Aziraphale, even on long stretches of mind-numbing highway, a pleasure.

The set-up at their campsite was easy, too. Crowley’s intended project route was within spitting distance of a small, overgrown parking area that clearly didn’t see much use, but suited their purposes just fine. Nat and Newt could camp there in the van, and the rest could pitch their tents in a clearing just a couple of minutes’ walk from the trailhead.

Aziraphale went to gather firewood while Crowley unloaded their bags and organized the camp. Every time Aziraphale returned to dump another armful of twigs and branches at the edge of their campsite, Crowley told a terrible joke about pitching tents that made Aziraphale laugh and shake his head. Crowley delighted in getting Aziraphale to groan at a really cringe-worthy joke and absolutely cackled every time.

Two sets of hands made quick work of their preliminary camp, and it was still only mid-afternoon by the time they had a serviceable home for the evening. The ground was a little wet from the early spring rains, so Aziraphale’s success with his firewood collection duties had been limited. Crowley joined him in gathering the rest of the kindling they would need for the night after the tent and kitchen were assembled.

“Is this where I make jokes about wet hardwood?” Crowley cheesed and held up the biggest stick he had found.

Aziraphale rolled his eyes so fondly that Crowley’s grin cracked open even further. “Good Lord, you are absolutely unstoppable, aren’t you?”

“Nah, you could definitely stop me.”

“Oh, do tell me how. I’m not sure how much more of your middle-school brand of humor I can take.”

Crowley snickered and dropped the handful of twigs he’d collected onto their firewood heap, then walked over to Aziraphale to press their bodies together and snake his arms around his neck.

“You could come inspect my work in the tent with me,” he suggested.

Aziraphale’s hands flexed where they landed on Crowley’s waist, just a quick squeeze that pulled Crowley in a little closer. “Are there concerns about your ability to lay out two sleeping bags?”

Crowley huffed a laugh into Aziraphale's neck, then kissed underneath his ear. "Yeah. It's a real fuckin' mess in there. Gonna need you to come supervise me."

"The expert that I am on camping."

"Needs your discerning eye."

Aziraphale walked them backwards toward the tent, where Crowley reached out to fumble with the zipper while Aziraphale pulled the neck of his shirt aside and sucked a bruise onto the round of his shoulder. They tumbled into the tent together, landing on their sides with their legs in a tangle, and didn't bother zipping the door closed. No one else was around to see.

"This looks like a fine job erecting a tent, to my eye," Aziraphale said with a little smirk as he made a show of looking around their makeshift home.

Crowley laughed. "See! You can't resist it!"

"Mmhm. Can't resist you either."

"So glad we came out a day early," Crowley gasped as Aziraphale reached between them and palmed his dick through his leggings.

"Me too," Aziraphale agreed as he began divesting clothes, working the buttons of his shirt one-handed while the other kept a maddeningly simple pressure where Crowley desperately craved friction. As soon as he exposed a sufficient sliver of skin, both of Crowley's hands found his chest like magnets, tugging on his chest hair, grabbing and kneading like he couldn't get enough.

"God, you're so fucking hot," Crowley whispered like he was talking to himself, then his gaze snapped up to meet Aziraphale's. "Fuck me?"

"With pleasure, sweetheart."

"Brought s-stuff this time," Crowley stuttered through a gasp at the little roll of Aziraphale's palm. Aziraphale tossed shirt aside and assisted Crowley in kind, pulling his shirt off and then smoothing his hands up Crowley's bared chest. Crowley blindly jammed his hand into one of the mesh tent pockets to retrieve the travel-sized bottle of lube and a packet of wet wipes.

"Clever boy, coming prepared."

"Prepared to come, more like."

"You don't ever stop, do you?"

"Mmmnope."

Aziraphale rolled Crowley onto his back (notably on *Aziraphale's* brand new sleeping pad, that did not escape notice) and surged forward to press their lips together. A sudden flush of warmth spread between their bodies as the kiss deepened, intensified, became a ravenous and greedy thing. Crowley felt fingers trail down his stomach, each hot like a brand on their path to the waistband of his leggings, where they hooked and dragged them down, down, down.

"Fuck, I don't know that I'll last?"

“Since when have you ever stopped at just one?”

“Fair point, but... hnnngk, yeah, yeah. Okay, you gotta stop touching my dick. Fuck, just do it, where’s the...?”

Aziraphale held up the little bottle of lube and smiled. “Relax, I’ve got it. Let me take care of you, hmm?”

“Angel,” Crowley whined because he was feeling impatient, but Aziraphale just chuckled at him, the bastard.

The snick of the bottle cap brought Crowley some measure of relief, though. At least they were moving in the right direction. Aziraphale leaned back onto his heels to help peel Crowley the rest of the way out of his leggings, while Crowley grabbed a travel towel, wrapped it over his camping pillow, and stuffed it beneath his hitched-up hips.

“I am so not cleaning cum off a sleeping bag,” he said with the regretful tone of a man too experienced in doing just that.

“Clever boy. Do you want to roll over for me, too?”

“Ooh, Angel wanna hit it from behind, huh?” Crowley teased as he flipped onto his stomach and wiggled his ass.

“Filthy, crude thing.”

“I thought I was a clever bo—oooooy, oh! Cold!”

Aziraphale gleefully swiped a very cold, slick finger down the cleft of Crowley’s ass.

“That was cruel, Angel.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Aziraphale murmured as he began tracing a spiral around Crowley’s rim, moving ever so slowly toward the center.

“So cruel,” Crowley gasped and dropped his head to the ground, closing his eyes tightly and trying to rein in his desire to fuck himself on the finger teasing him. He squirmed ineffectually, instead.

“Patience, patience,” Aziraphale said as he traced the dimples on Crowley’s lower back and the knobs of his spine with his free hand, then pressed down to hold Crowley in place as he pushed that first finger past his rim, all the way inside him in one smooth, steady movement.

Crowley’s long, ragged moan in response and the way his body clenched up tight around the intrusion was a heady thing. Aziraphale was beginning to sympathize with his urgency. He leaned down to kiss the back of Crowley’s thigh as he slid that lone finger out, then back in, slow and gentle.

Once Crowley relaxed around the first finger, Aziraphale worked in a second, then a third, all the while pressing his lips to the spots on Crowley’s body where his lean muscles tensed and rippled in his effort to remain still.

“You’re doing so well for me. Always so good for me.”

Crowley groaned something incoherent into the crinkly material of the sleeping bag in response. Aziraphale couldn't work out the words themselves, but the tone was clear enough.

"How many issat?" Crowley lifted his head to slur.

Aziraphale replied simply, "Three."

Crowley groaned again and let his head fall back to the sleeping bag. His hips were moving, making tiny circles and little rutting thrusts into the pillow under his hips and back onto Aziraphale's fingers where they stretched him open.

"Almost there, my dear," he reassured as he petted the backs of Crowley's mile-long legs in long, soothing strokes.

Aziraphale withdrew his fingers once Crowley was finally loosened up enough and his body relaxed. Crowley whined pitifully at the loss, but Aziraphale shushed him.

"Just a bit longer, I'm still here," he said as he reached again for the little bottle, dropped his trousers, and slicked himself up.

"Hurry up, Angel," Crowley huffed, demanding little shit that he was, and punctuated his plea with a wiggle of his hips, as if Aziraphale didn't know exactly what he was asking for.

"Alright, alright. How do you want to—"

"Like this. Just—like this. Please?"

Aziraphale crawled on top of Crowley and nipped at his earlobe. Crowley whimpered and turned his head further, stretching out his neck to give better access to Aziraphale's roving mouth. He was only too happy to take the opportunity to mark up Crowley's neck.

"Like this?" Aziraphale asked as he pressed the hard line of his cock against Crowley's ass.

"Yeah, yeah. Please?"

"Soon, sweet thing," he reassured, then ran a hand down Crowley's side to his hip as he rutted against him, sliding the slick length along the cleft of his ass. Every time the head of his cock caught against Crowley's rim, Crowley would squirm and whine, desperate to be filled.

Aziraphale didn't make him wait any longer. He let go of Crowley's hip to guide himself in, pressing forward in one slow, constant, inexorable push, as he'd learned Crowley liked. The first thrust left Crowley breathless as his body resisted the intrusion, his hole tight and clenching spasmodically as his mouth dropped open with a loud groan.

"Ohhhhh, fuck. *Fuck*, Angel," he bit out, his fists white-knuckle clenching the sleeping bag on either side of his head as he willed his body to relax around the thick girth it was trying to accommodate.

Aziraphale bottomed out but held still, giving Crowley a much-needed opportunity to get used to the stretch burning its way through his core. He petted Crowley's side, kissed his neck, and soothed the furrow in his brow.

“Take your time, my dear,” he said, though if he was being honest, Aziraphale was struggling to hold still, himself. In that position, with Crowley on his stomach, legs tightly together, the hot, slick squeeze around his cock was maddening. Some primitive, basal part of his consciousness was beating a drum in his chest and chanting a war cry of *fuck him, fuck him, fuck him!*

Blessedly, Crowley didn’t need long to adjust. A ragged sigh escaped him, and he nodded. “Okay, m’good now.”

Aziraphale leaned in closer, pressing himself fully to his lover’s back. He threaded his arm underneath Crowley, crossing his chest to grip his opposite shoulder for leverage, effectively binding his upper body in a tight hold.

Crowley moaned when he realized Aziraphale’s intent with that position, “Oh *god*. Fuck, yeah. Fuck me, fuck me. Use me, Daddy, please!”

And who was Aziraphale to deny such sweet and desperate pleas from this man? He withdrew slowly for the first thrust, but pushed back in, sharp and quick with a devastating snap of his hips. Crowley wailed and scrabbled his fingers against their bags.

“Oh, *good boy*. How does that feel?” Aziraphale murmured into his ear with a tone that suggested he already knew the answer. He just wanted to hear Crowley say it.

“F-fuck. So good. Feels so good inside, Daddy.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmhm.”

Now, Aziraphale had a suspicion about Crowley’s interests based on his tendency toward that particular type of pornographically explicit dirty talk in the sack. The man unashamedly and enthusiastically called him “Daddy,” after all, and, truth be told, though Aziraphale had never harbored any particular interests in that realm before, Crowley was persuasive in his earnestness and abandon. Aziraphale had never been much of a dirty talker at all, not in previous relationships. He was usually too embarrassed to say the things that his mind supplied for fear of what his partner would think. All of them had also been fairly averse to it, too, so the opportunity never arose.

With Crowley, though—for Crowley—Aziraphale thought it was worth pushing past his social anxieties. Crowley didn’t seem like the type of partner who would laugh at him for trying. Quite the opposite, actually.

So...

“You—you like how Daddy’s big cock makes you feel, don’t you, sweet thing?” he asked, trying his hardest not to lose his bravado and mumble it awkwardly into Crowley’s skin. Despite the words feeling so alien to him, he thought he sounded pretty confident.

And Crowley fucking *lost it*.

“ Oh, holy fff—” he groaned as his eyes rolled back, “Yes Daddy—*ahn*—love it, love it, love it.”

Gratified that his little experiment worked and emboldened by Crowley’s response (he clenched up *so tight*), Aziraphale continued. “Yes, you do like that, don’t you? You like it when Daddy holds

you down and fucks you hard, just like this.”

“Yes! Yeah, yes—*hnn*—fuck, fuck, *fuck*, yes, harder!” Crowley cried out and began rocking himself back in time with Aziraphale’s pace. The sound of his hips slapping against Crowley’s ass in rhythmic *thwap, thwap, thwaps* was an utterly obscene soundtrack for the peaceful forest clearing they were camping in, god forbid any hikers should walk by, but Aziraphale couldn’t find it in himself to care. Not with the way Crowley was moaning and writhing on his cock like he’d never had better.

“You feel so good for Daddy, too, sweetheart, such a perfect boy,” he praised as he admired the ecstatic expressions flitting across Crowley’s face, the sweat beading on his forehead, and the debauched shapes his slackened mouth made when he cried out.

“Come inside me, come inside, please, please, please!” Crowley begged, and *wow*, did that push Aziraphale straight to the tenuous, bleeding edge of his self-control. He forced himself to slow down for a moment to gather his wits and mount another offensive against Crowley’s arousal. He’d made it that far with his porn fantasy dialogue, and he’d be damned if he finished before he made Crowley come so hard that he forgot how to use his legs.

In for a penny, in for a pounding.

“I will, don’t you worry, darling boy. Daddy will take such good care of you, precious. I’m going to fuck this tight little hole of yours until you cry, and then I’m going to fill you up with my cum.”

Crowley wailed again and began rutting into the pillow under his hips. “Yes, yes, *please*, yes, want it so bad!”

Aziraphale had expected to feel awkward, saying those things out loud, and to an audience, no less. He’d expected a hot wave of mortification to wash over him, like it had when he’d spent a few recent evenings perusing Pornhub (with nineteen incognito tabs open) for concrete examples of Crowley’s kinks and repeated the dialogue back to the screen with red-faced shame and the hardest erection of his long life. He had put a pin in his freshly manifested humiliation fetish for the time being, though, and learned the very unsubtle art of playing the Daddy role. His practice sessions made it easier to get the words out, and so did Crowley’s absolutely feral response to Aziraphale growling them in his ear.

“Daddy is going to breed you, baby boy,” he said and resumed the quick, relentless pace that was causing Crowley’s thighs to tremble and his toes to curl.

“O-oh,” Crowley gasped, “fuckin’ *breed me*? Christ, Angel, where did you learn—you’re gonna—*oh*! Oh, m’gonna—*mmnh*—I can’t—can I c-come?”

“Are you there, sweet boy? Close?” Aziraphale asked through gritted teeth. He hoped for sake that Crowley was, in fact, close.

“Hah—*ah* ! F-fuck, yes, yes, yes, so fuckin’ close, Daddy. Please let me come?”

Aziraphale couldn’t resist one last prod at Crowley’s dwindling resolve. “Mm, I don’t know. Do you deserve it?”

“Fuck!” Crowley bit out the swear and squeezed his eyes shut as a plaintive, frustrated sob ripped out of his chest. “Been s-so good for—*ah* !—for you.”

Aziraphale was so gone for this man that he couldn't help but smile. "You're right, you have been *very* good. Go on, baby. Come for your Daddy."

Three quick thrusts thereafter, Crowley sobbed again and screamed some unholy garbled noise into the drool-soaked sleeping bag beneath his face while his hips jerked, uncontrolled, into the pillow underneath him.

"Good— *ahn* —good boy, there you go— *oh* —such a good boy," Aziraphale praised as he kept up his pace, fucking Crowley through his peak and straight into bright shocks of over stimulation. Crowley curled a hand around Aziraphale's forearm across his chest and squeezed weakly in a plea for mercy.

"Almost there, sweet boy, just a little more for Daddy."

"Hnnngk."

Crowley made a few valiant but feeble attempts to meet Aziraphale's thrusts again despite his bonelessness. Fortunately, Aziraphale didn't need much help to tumble over the edge. He muffled a moan into Crowley's shoulder as his hips stuttered to a finish and the incredible tension in his body broke, spilling hot and wet as deep as he could go. He collapsed into a sweaty, fucked-out heap across Crowley's body.

"Oh my God," Aziraphale breathed shakily into the beard-rashed pink skin on Crowley's neck. "Oh my *God*."

"Y'r tellin' me," Crowley mumbled from somewhere in the crumpled sleeping bag fabric.

"That was..." Aziraphale started to say, but his heart was pounding and his breath was outside of his command for the moment.

"Yeah," was the muffled reply.

"Yeah."

After a couple of minutes in exhausted, gratified silence, Crowley squirmed underneath him.

"I bet that mess underneath you is pretty uncomfortable," Aziraphale said sympathetically as he pushed himself upright on shaky arms.

Crowley followed suit with a grimace. "Like you wouldn't believe, Angel. Worth it though."

"I'm glad to hear that, my dear."

They cleaned up with wet wipes in the companionable quiet of their tent, occasionally giggling at the disaster they had wreaked upon their bed.

"Where in the fuck did 'Daddy's gonna breed you' come from?!"

Aziraphale laughed, still a little breathless. "I hope that was enjoyable for you. It wasn't too much?"

"No, it was fucking amazing. I came so hard that it gave me a headache. But don't dodge the question."

“Ah. Well, I did some... research?”

“You did research.”

“Yes.”

“How does one go about researching such a thing, Angel?”

“I’d rather not say, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Oh, no, no, no. Now you really have to tell me!” Crowley insisted gleefully as he wagged a finger.

Aziraphale sighed the beleaguered sigh of a man defeated, but his lips twitched at a smile nevertheless. “Pornhub?” He offered meekly.

Crowley burst into a delighted, wide-eyed cackle. “You did not!”

“I did,” Aziraphale nodded solemnly.

“What did you search for?” Crowley asked with a knowing smirk that was so irritating that Aziraphale wanted to smack him, just a little.

“Oh, don’t make me—”

“Tell me!”

Aziraphale pursed his lips and gave Crowley a hard stare, but Crowley was clearly unwilling to relent. He sighed again and admitted, “Daddy/twink.”

Crowley laughed so hard that he actually fell over, clutching his sides and wiping tears from his cheeks. Aziraphale felt hopelessly fond.

“Am I—am I the twink?!” Crowley gasped between peals of laughter. Aziraphale rolled his eyes.

“Oh dear Lord.”

Once Crowley stopped convulsing on the tent floor, he sat up again and grinned, wide and mischievous. “I’m at *least* a twunk, Angel, let’s be accurate here.”

Aziraphale huffed in mock offense. “Well, I wasn’t overly concerned with accuracy on that particular front!”

“You just needed some hot Daddy inspo?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, you killed it, Angel. Fifteen out of ten, not even joking, hottest fuck of my entire life to date.” He leaned forward and pecked a kiss on Aziraphale’s cheek. Aziraphale reached up to touch that spot as if to hold the sweet affection more closely, press it into his skin, and never let it go.

“Really?” He asked.

Crowley confirmed with a decisive nod. “Really, really.”

Aziraphale fidgeted a bit, unsure of how to proceed but wanting to know more nevertheless. “No, erm... no feedback? Things you would like to do differently next time? Or—or things you particularly liked?”

Crowley paused to think. “Mmm, no complaints, that’s for sure. *Jesus Christ*, Angel.”

And Aziraphale was grateful that Crowley enjoyed it, he truly was. But... “I’ve never really done... that... before,” he admitted with a meekness that he hated to hear in voice.

Crowley only looked puzzled, though. “Done what? Daddy shit? We do that all the time.”

“No, no. Well yes, we do, but I meant the, um, the language.”

“Oooh, right,” Crowley said and nodded in realization. “The dirty talk, you mean.”

“Yes, that. I’ve never done that before, so I was a bit nervy.”

Crowley softened and gave him a little smile. “Oh, Angel. You did fuckin’ amazing. Like, *whoa*, like seriously, blew my mind amazing. That bit about pinning me down and fucking me until I cried? Devastating. In the best way.”

Aziraphale was so pleased that he wiggled on the spot. “Oh, good!”

“Yeah. For real. You killed it. Hell, you almost killed me,” he added with a breathy chuckle.

“Hush, silly man.” Aziraphale swatted at his arm, but Crowley dodged the retaliatory hand with a triumphant grin.

“You seriously did all that for me?” Crowley asked as if he couldn’t possibly believe that someone would go through the effort for him, but Aziraphale couldn’t imagine anyone *not* wanting to give Crowley the world.

He didn’t say that, though. Instead, he simply replied, “I did,” with a tentative shrug.

“Huh,” Crowley responded, looking for all the world as if he was in the midst of a revelation, if the far-away look in his eye was anything to judge by.

Aziraphale felt compelled to explain himself. “I-I suppose I wanted to meet you halfway. You’re always saying these things in the moment, and I wanted to indulge you a bit in return.”

Crowley was staring at him, looking more than a little flabbergasted, but the slow smile that spread across his face was telling. “Well... thanks, Angel. That actually means a lot to me, weirdly enough.”

“You’re welcome, my dear,” Aziraphale said, and reached out to tuck an errant strand of flaming red hair that he adored so much behind Crowley’s blushed-hot ear.



An illustration of Aziraphale and Crowley walking down a sun-dappled hiking trail side-by-side, with Mt. Ofelia looming in the distance.

Mt. Ofelia State Park was more lovely than Aziraphale had imagined, especially in early spring with the natural landscape dressed to the nines in its floral finery. The white dogwoods and magenta crepe myrtle blossoms were daubed against the lime green vernal leaves with a painter's fan brush and a heavy hand, and it was breathtaking to witness. Crowley pointed out dark purple wild irises where they hid among their spiky leaves in the hollows and plucked up early-season chanterelles that the spring rains had summoned from the earth. Aziraphale panicked a little when Crowley popped a whole mushroom into his mouth straight from the ground, insisting that he was going to get himself poisoned, but Crowley apparently knew how to forage. The chanterelles tasted like loamy apricots, and Aziraphale loved them.

"So this is it. That's the Big Climb. Or at least it will be," Crowley said with his hands on his hips, staring up at the sheer vertical rock face looming over them with a lazy grin like he was daring it to remain unconquered. But it was daunting to Aziraphale, to say the least.

"Where is the route that you intend to climb?" he asked because, quite honestly, he wasn't sure how anyone would climb any of it, even someone as skilled as Crowley.

"Ah, that's the million-dollar question, ain't it?" Crowley said with a wider grin, but pointed at a small outcrop of boulders to their right. "I think that's the start. That's just a bouldering problem up to that ledge."

Aziraphale's eyes followed the rocky path Crowley pointed out up to a low shelf in the mountainside, just above the boulders.

"That ledge is where the climbing actually begins," he continued with a matter-of-factness to his tone that sounded like finishing this climb was a foregone conclusion. "You see that kinda scoop-looking dip in the rock there? I think I'll follow the edge of that depression 'cause it looks like it has some passable handholds."

Aziraphale honestly did not see a single feature that looked as if it was scalable by mere mortal humans, bound to the earth by the indomitable pull of gravity as we all are, but what did he know?

Crowley carried on with a sweep of his hand upward, "Then there's this fiddly bit through the midsection here. Honestly, the rock there is like negative eighty grit sandpaper, it's so full of little pebbles that just want to tear up your fingers, but if I can get past that..."

He pointed further up, to a long vertical crack in the face, just a thin sheet of dark-stained rock with jagged edges, jutting out diagonally at a deep angle. "Then I'm cruising up that cozy little knife blade there until I hit that light-colored band of crumbly-looking rock above it. There's a shelf up there to rest on. Can't see it from here, of course, so you'll have to take my word for it."

"And after that is anyone's guess. Some folks have climbed up to that shelf, but as far as I know, no one has ever topped out on the rest."

"The rest" being hundreds of feet of unforgiving sheer rock face. A mountain. An actual mountain. Just looking at it from the ground gave Aziraphale vertigo.

"No one has ever climbed this mountain?"

"Nah, they have. Just not on this side. This is the east face. The west and south faces are actually decently popular climbs, but they're also a lot shorter and a lot easier."

“How tall is this?” Aziraphale asked.

Crowley hemmed and hawed but seemed to make up his mind after a time. “Ehh... should be about thirteen hundred feet for the climb.”

Thirteen hundred feet sounded absurd—so implausibly tall that *of course* it couldn’t be done. “Is that even—*how*?”

Crowley laughed at that. “You think that’s bad, imagine climbing El Cap out West.”

“What is that?”

“El Capitan, in Yosemite.”

“Oh, I know that one!” Aziraphale declared proudly, before the whiplash of realization hit and he did a double take. “Wait, people *climb* that?!”

Crowley nodded. “Yup. And that’s like... three thousand feet, so... could be worse.”

“Could be worse...” Aziraphale murmured with a disbelieving shake of his head. “But—but why climb *this*? If the other faces are, err... climbable?”

Crowley grinned wide and smug and proud, like he was in on a joke that Aziraphale didn’t understand. Some naughty little secret that he kept in his heart of hearts and giggled about, alone in the dark.

“Cause no one’s ever done it before, Angel.”

Crowley spent some time taking pictures of the prospective route on his phone and texting them to Nat so that they could strategize. Aziraphale gawped at the mountain and took mental notes for Nina and Maggie about shot compositions that he thought they would like.

“Ready to head back?” Crowley asked and hooked a thumb toward their camp. It wasn’t far, of course, but Aziraphale appreciated walking together.

“When ever you are,” he deferred.

Crowley took a couple more minutes to just... look—look at the mountain, at the route he was puzzling out, at the challenge ahead—and then waved for Aziraphale to follow him back home for the night.

Back at camp, Aziraphale retrieved water in the waterskin while Crowley set up their camp stove for dinner and started a fire. With the car so close by, they had been able to pack in a cooler with some real food to supplement their freeze-dried plastic sack food horrors, for which Aziraphale was immensely grateful. His reconstituted pesto pasta left something to be desired as epicurean concerns went.

They sat by the fire as the sun set and talked aimlessly into the evening. The spring weather still bore a chill in the air, so at one point Aziraphale retrieved a blanket from the car and wrapped them both up together. It was nice. Romantic, even.

He had been surprised at how open Crowley was to his romantic overtures, to be certain. Pleasantly surprised, but surprised nevertheless. Given Crowley's insistence during his interview some months prior that he was not a man predisposed to long-term entanglements, Aziraphale didn't expect that he would so readily behave like a... boyfriend.

"You know," Aziraphale began, but cleared his throat. Nerves. *Try to sound casual*. "We've been at this for almost six months now."

"Oh, shit, you're right. When did we meet?" Crowley asked and appeared to be counting off the time in his head.

"September. That was the first round of interviews."

"Woah. Doesn't seem like that long at all, does it?"

"It doesn't."

"Wild. How long does a doc usually take to film?"

That wasn't what Aziraphale was talking about at all, but he wasn't sure if Crowley was deflecting or just hadn't picked up the thread yet.

"It varies quite a bit. Could be a few months or it could be years, depending on the subject."

"Well, let's hope it doesn't take me years to finish this climb."

"Hopefully not! But I wouldn't mind if it did."

Recognition dawned on Crowley's face. He stuttered, "Oh, I—"

"You don't... you don't have to. What I mean to say is—"

"No, it's just—"

Aziraphale held up a hand to stop Crowley's dithering and forced a little chuckle to defuse his sudden bout of nerves. "Crowley, I understand if it's something—if *we* are something—that you hadn't considered very deeply. But... but I want you to know that I have considered it, and if you were—are—amenable to it, I would very much like to try to, erm... try to... be together. In a relationship."

Crowley was stunned silent, stock-still, and breathing shallow and rapid. Aziraphale couldn't help but fill the heavy silence, so he rambled on.

"We—I have really enjoyed getting to know you these past six months. I think we work well together, you and me. I like you. Good Lord, that sounds so middle-school of me, but I do." He laughed again at ridiculousness. "And I would like to be something more if—if you do, too. If you want to try. I want to try."

Crowley was so, so still. Aziraphale didn't dare turn to look at him, but he could feel the tense line of Crowley's body where their shoulders and thighs touched, and that wasn't the response he had hoped for at all.

He scrambled to rectify the disaster he had brought down on them. "I'm—I'm sorry, that was foolish of me. Please let's just forget I said—"

Finally, Crowley interjected. "Ah, no. No, no, Angel. I'm sorry. You just uhh... you caught me off guard, I think."

"I am sorry for—"

"Don't. You don't have to be. Please don't apologize. That's... amazing. You're amazing. I am... m'just a piece of shit former junkie rock climbing dirtbag and you're so—I would... I—" Crowley blew out a shaky sigh and scrubbed his hands over his face. Aziraphale's traitorous heart felt something akin to hope, but not for long.

Crowley grunted and looked away. "I can't, is all. This won't... it won't work like you hope it will. And I think you deserve better than that, Angel."

Aziraphale laughed. He hoped it didn't sound too bitter. "Please don't call me 'Angel' while you're rejecting me."

Crowley looked horrified. "I—"

"It's okay, Crowley. It's fine. I knew from the beginning... you even said it in your interviews! You don't do relationships because of your career and the traveling and your... your hookups or whatever you do. I knew I was taking a risk. I just didn't care. You were worth it."

"Ang—Aziraphale..."

"Really, Crowley, we can move on. I put it out there, and you aren't interested, and that is okay. You aren't obligated to anything with me."

For the first time in their entire not-relationship, the silence in the air between them was an awkward, gaping chasm. Crowley was fidgeting like he could flee at any moment, and Aziraphale honestly would not have minded if he did.

"M'sorry, 'Ziraphale."

"It's okay."

"Do you want me to drive you home tonight or something? Or a motel nearby. I can give you a lift, anywhere you want to go, just... I don't want you to feel stuck out here with me."

"N-no," Aziraphale declined, a little wobbly and wet. He had been so strong up to that point, but the thought of being somewhere else, somewhere far away from Crowley with a purposeful, intentional distance between them sounded just as horrible as sleeping next to him in the tent did.

"You should—maybe take the tent tonight. I can sleep in the car, it's no problem."

"Yes. That's probably a good idea. I am going to need some space for a little while."

“Yeah, yeah. ‘Course, anything you want, just tell me.”

And *that* did it.

“Apparently not,” Aziraphale said weakly, watery with tears and a spiteful edge that he just couldn’t help.

Crowley looked stunned. “I... no, I guess not.”

Aziraphale stood a little too quickly to be entirely casual. “I am going to turn in for the night. I trust that you can handle the camp for the evening?”

Crowley gaped up at him, but agreed nevertheless. “Sure, yeah.”

Aziraphale nodded decisively, trying to put more resolve into his words than he actually felt. He desperately did not want to cry in front of Crowley, and he already felt so pathetic. “Thank you. I will put your things outside the tent so that you have some bedding for the... the car.”

“Thanks,” Crowley replied vacantly, staring after Aziraphale as he walked off to the tent.

Aziraphale toed his shoes off, climbed in, and gathered Crowley’s things in a numb daze. He couldn’t stand to look at Crowley, so he just dropped the heap in the tent’s vestibule and zipped the flap shut behind himself. It was achingly lonely in there.

He didn’t bother changing his clothes. He just lay on his bed for the night and stared vacantly at the empty space beside him. Crowley came by moments later to grab his sleeping bag and pad and toiletries as quietly as he could, but the tent didn’t muffle any sounds. Aziraphale hated how fervently he wished Crowley would unzip the stupid tent flap separating them and join him inside, despite everything that had just transpired.

He heard Crowley’s footsteps receding away, crunching through the forest floor. Aziraphale hated that, too. The car door opened and closed again distantly, then Crowley returned to the campsite and pattered around for a while, cleaning up and managing the fire for the night.

The camp fell quiet after a while. Aziraphale didn’t want to listen so closely to whatever Crowley was doing out there, but he didn’t have much of a choice. The woods were so still in the night that, aside from the occasional rustle of the breeze and a crack from the fire, he figured he could very nearly hear Crowley thinking if he strained to try. And he desperately wanted to know what Crowley was thinking, even if it would kill him to hear.

But he didn’t ask. He didn’t move, really. He just stared at the flimsy tent wall and held his tears at bay until Crowley decided to go to bed. He hoped it was soon because he could still feel the sting welling up in his eyes, and it wasn’t getting any better.

Some time later, ever so quietly, he heard Crowley mutter under his breath, “*Fuck.*”

And didn’t that just say it all?

[crowley_interview_session3_finalfinalFINAL.mp4]

“Tell me more about the Big Climb, if you don’t mind,” Aziraphale prompted. He needed some good footage of Crowley discussing the reason they were all here in this documentary endeavor in the first place.

Crowley took a sip from his water bottle and nodded agreeably. “Sure. What should I talk about?”

“Anything you’d like. How about this as a place to start: you tell me the basics about what it entails and we’ll go from there.”

“Alright. So, well uh, this Big Climb is in Mt. Ofelia State Park, which is like five-ish hours from here? Anyway, Mount Ofelia is a popular climbing area. There’s great rock there, and, most importantly, there is a face of the mountain that nobody has been able to climb yet.”

“Have you been wanting to climb it for a while, or...?”

“Oh yeah. It’s been a target for me for years. It’s the tallest face on the East Coast, so of course it’s an attractive goal to a lot of climbers. Plenty have tried it, but nobody has managed to finish the whole thing. And I’d like to be the guy that names the first route, yeah.”

“And whoever finishes it first names the route?”

“Exactly right.”

“What do you want to name it? Anything in mind?”

Crowley grinned but wagged a finger. “Ahhh, ah ah ah. Nope. That’s bad luck. Not even gonna think about it. Not until I’m at the top.”

Aziraphale found that adorably superstitious, but he let it slide. “Well, that’s fair enough, I suppose. What do you see as the challenges?”

Crowley gathered his thoughts for a moment.

“Well, I think the most obvious issue is the height of the face. It takes a lot of endurance to sustain a long climb like that, so I’ll have to work on really basic stuff like cardiovascular fitness just to be able to keep up the effort for that long. That’ll take a lot of work. And then I’ll have to identify how I want to climb it, I mean... there’s no one path to the top.”

Which Aziraphale found mind-boggling, frankly. He would prefer to take the elevator to the top, thanks. “You’ll have to, erm, blaze the trail yourself, as it were?”

“Yup. So there’s research to be done to figure out the best way to do that. Like, a lot of research—what rope I’ll need, what kind of anchors I should use and where, how I should divide the climb into different pitches, where the breaks are, that sort of thing. And then there’s even more work in, like... sheer trial and error to work out the individual climbing techniques that different sections of the climb will require of me,” Crowley explained carefully, ticking off each point on his fingers.

“Oh!” he tacked on at the end with a laugh at himself like he was amused that he could forget the most important part, “And then I gotta actually practice it all before I even attempt the Big Climb itself, which will inevitably take a few tries.”

“It sounds as if this will take quite a bit of time and effort. That’s quite an undertaking.”

Crowley grinned, perhaps a little ruefully. “Yeah, it will. Always does. And that is exactly why I have like, no life outside of climbing.”

Chapter End Notes

Imao come join the BG server if you wanna yell at me about this in real-time

 **Join us on the [Belayed Gratification Discord Server](#)** for early notice of fic updates, WIPs of the illustrations as I work on them (server members see 'em first!) wild theories and speculation, pictures of rocks, an archive of the illustrations for this story, and silly conversation with other weirdos and degenerates, because that is absolutely a thing that we all needed.

Also catch me on:

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Deadpoint

Chapter Summary

The Big Climb awaits.

Chapter Notes

This story has just passed the 172k words mark total. -sigh-

 **CONTENT WARNINGS:** This chapter contains heavy themes and serious situations that may be distressing for some readers. I have provided three levels of spoilers below, depending on your comfort level.

If you don't want any spoilers, don't click any of the following.

- ▶  Click here for **general content guidance only, no spoilers.**
- ▶  Click here for **content warnings with limited spoilers.**
- ▶  Click here for **content warnings with specific spoilers.**

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Newt felt the weird, disquieting energy at Aziraphale and Crowley's campsite the moment that he stepped out of the van on Sunday morning. It rolled over him like static, prickling at the hairs on his arms, making his stomach clench with anticipatory guilt he hadn't earned.

He wondered if some of Nat's sixth sense was rubbing off on him, but he checked if he could discern her aura and didn't see anything, so that was... probably good? He honestly wasn't sure if he would be comfortable seeing people's auras—it seemed so invasive. And also terribly inconvenient. Sometimes he preferred not to know what people were feeling about him. A little bit of ignorance was truly bliss, as far as Newt was concerned.

But if he *could* see auras, he was pretty sure the aura around that camp was flashing red and making loud klaxon noises, like a radioactive meltdown site under evacuation orders. Did auras make a sound? He'd have to ask Nat later because she had just stepped down from the van, too, and had immediately frozen on the spot like her senses were being assaulted by some malevolent presence.

They made eye contact, and Newt tilted his head in a silent *what the fuck?*

She shook her head in a stern “no,” lips pursed and eyes narrowed. Newt knew better than to disobey that look.

Crowley had slept in the car the night before, if the rumpled sleeping bag in the back seat was anything to go by. Moreover, he looked like he'd been on an all-night bender—dark circles under his eyes, a pallor that made him look vaguely undead, skin all ashy and dehydrated, clothes wrinkled, and his hair plastered to one side of his head while the other side was a wild red nest. His sunglasses were on, which was somehow worse than if they hadn't been. It made him unreadable and brittle-looking, like glass under pressure.

Newt caught the faint smell of stale coffee and cigarettes clinging to him—a detail that he filed away without comment. There was a faint chalky dust along the thigh of Crowley's pants that looked fresh, like he'd wandered to the wall before sunrise just to stand there and glare at it. He did that sometimes.

Aziraphale's absence around the camp loomed just as large. There was a folded jacket by the camp chair where he should have been, a cold mug of tea beside it, the milk in the cup having formed a pale, waxy skin. Crowley's neglect looked loud; Aziraphale's absence looked careful and curated, as though he'd tidied himself away for fear of burdening someone else with his distress.

Nat sidled up to him and whispered, "This is going to be the most awkward day of our lives."

Newt couldn't help but grin at her, but he smothered it before Crowley's bleary eyes could catch him.

Crowley was in a *mood*. He got like that sometimes; it was just a Crowley thing. He was mercurial at the best times and downright vicious at the worst. Newt had known him long enough now to be able to pick up the signals and make himself scarce in the name of self-preservation. He liked Crowley a lot—loved him like a brother, in fact—though he'd never tell Crowley that, but he knew better than to be in the path of his storms.

And this storm, whatever it was, had been building all morning. The air had that heavy, pressurized feel, like just before thunder rolled in. It was the kind of pressure that made you hold your breath without realizing it, like the whole forest had agreed not to exhale until something gave.

"I, for one, would like to make a motion to get in the van and just drive far, far away," he whispered back to Nat.

She snorted quietly and bumped against his shoulder. "Second that motion."

"We could probably make it a couple of states over before they even noticed. We could change our names, assume new identities..."

She laughed outright at that. It broke through the tension like sunlight through bad blinds. Newt loved making Nat laugh. He lived for that sound.

He grabbed her forearm and gave his best pleading puppydog eyes. "I could get a nice corporate job, and you could open a metaphysical shop. Think of the possibilities, Nat! You and your aura-reading, me and my... spreadsheets."

They couldn't just leave, of course, but a man could dream, couldn't he?

Nat's laughter subsided, and Newt sighed. "Are you gonna try to talk to him?" he asked.

"Oh hell no, not when he's like this. Maybe later."

Newt just nodded. He trusted Nat to make the right decision. And anyway, it wasn't like *he* was about to volunteer to talk Crowley down from whatever snit he'd gotten himself into. Newt could be foolish sometimes, but he didn't have a death wish.

Still, something about today felt different. This was not just one of Crowley's garden-variety bad moods. This was a whole new, exotic category.

"Come on," she said, grabbing Newt's elbow. "Let's get this van unloaded while I think about how to handle this."

He followed her like a besotted puppy, just excited to be led wherever she wanted to take him. It was his favorite thing to do.

But even with his back to the car, he felt Crowley's stillness behind him like a hot lamp sweltering the back of his neck. There was no shifting weight, no idle clink of gear. It made Newt's skin itch. He glanced over his shoulder once, twice, telling himself he was just checking the van doors, but really he was making sure Crowley was still there, still upright.

He stood by the car like a man waiting for a sentence to be handed down. Not pacing or stretching or fidgeting with gear or sunglasses or cigarettes. Just... still.

Still was not Crowley's default. Still was not good.

Maggie was up early, for a Sunday. She was usually a morning lark anyway, especially in comparison to Nina, but that particular Sunday she had been up since before dawn.

The kitchen smelled faintly of last night's takeout cartons in the bin and the coffee she'd made an hour ago, the pot sitting on its warmer in anticipation. The early light slanted in through the miniblinds and made stripes across the countertop, her phone, and her hands.

So when Nina shuffled into their kitchen and grunted a "G'mornin', babe," she found a ready-made pot of bitter salvation in the Mr. Coffee and Maggie at the breakfast bar, worrying her lip with her teeth and typing on her phone in the morning light.

"Up long?" Nina asked as she pulled a mug from the cabinet.

Maggie sighed. She sounded stressed, and that made Nina's skin prickle. Not panic-stressed, just the kind of low-grade worry that made her chew her nails and refresh the same screen six times.

"I have. Since about six."

"Oh?" Nina prompted, not quite awake enough for full sentences but admittedly curious.

"It's Mister Fell," Maggie said, and waved her phone a little to signify they'd been texting.

"Wha's wrong?" Nina asked, pouring coffee from the glass carafe into her mug with a heavy hand. If she was going to have to deal with one of Mr. Fell's episodes of ennui about the documentary or some sort of personal existential crisis, she was going to need all the caffeine in the state.

“Trouble in paradise,” Maggie said, and typed quickly on her phone, her brows furrowed in concentration. Her thumbs stuttered, paused, then erased three words before starting again. Whatever this was, Maggie was choosing each phrase like it might have international diplomatic consequences.

Nina thought she looked adorable like that—forehead all knit up, hair half-tucked behind one ear, and that pretty pink lower lip caught by her teeth.

She slipped onto the stool next to Maggie and cradled her coffee mug in her hands like a prize. If Mr. Fell was having relationship issues, then she really, really needed to be on full alert.

“Oh no. What’d he do?”

Maggie shook her head absently, still texting. “It wasn’t him. Well, not exactly.”

Nina snorted. “So what did the asshole do?”

Maggie giggled in response, then looked over fondly at her wife. “Good morning, darling.”

“Morning,” Nina smiled as Maggie gave her a peck on the cheek. “Now tell me what’s going on so I can mentally prepare to walk into the lion’s den tomorrow.”

“Well,” Maggie drew a sharp breath, “apparently Mister Fell told Mister Crowley about his feelings.”

“Feelings with a capital *F*, I assume,” Nina said, right after her first sip of the morning.

“Those are the ones. And Mister Crowley didn’t take it well.”

“Oh?”

“I know. I was surprised, too.”

Nina wouldn’t say she was surprised, exactly. Crowley had the emotional intelligence of a teenager, after all, but she nodded along with Maggie’s assessment regardless.

“Mister Fell texted me early this morning to say that something had gone wrong. I’m not sure—he’s not being terribly clear on the details. But apparently he asked Mister Crowley to be something more permanent last night and Mister Crowley said no, though I’m not sure why.”

“Perhaps because he is a man-child.”

Maggie gave her a disapproving look.

“What? It’s true!” Nina protested, and that earned her a smack on the arm.

“But they’ve been so good together lately.”

“They have.”

“I’m just surprised that we aren’t hearing about wedding plans, really.”

Maggie was always so optimistic, and Nina loved that about her, but she had to laugh at the idea of Crowley on bended knee. Or in a tuxedo.

“Oh, I don’t believe that Mister Crowley is the type to commit like that.”

Maggie pouted. “Well, maybe not invitations to the ceremony and place settings yet, but they’ve been together for how long now? I just expected better for Mister Fell.”

“Me too. But he’s been chasing a known fuckboy.”

“Can you be a fuckboy if you’re in your mid-forties?” Maggie asked.

Nina was pretty sure she’d never heard of anyone accused of being a fuck *man*, so...

“I don’t think that they are mutually exclusive things, no.”

Maggie nodded, but pursed her lips. “And he’s not really, though, you know? He’s just... he’s like Mister Fell. Which is why I thought they would be good! They both have the same thing about their work, the same focus, and they travel a lot so the other would probably understand how that goes... It’s hard to keep up a relationship like that if your partner isn’t understanding.”

“I don’t think Mister Crowley wants understanding, babe.”

Maggie frowned. “I just wanted better for Mister Fell. He’s such a sweet man.”

“I know you did. And so do I.”

Maggie made a frustrated noise and tapped away at her phone again while Nina sipped her coffee. A tiny bubble popped up on the screen and vanished before Maggie could read it, making her scowl. Nina had seen that look before when a delivery order went wrong or when her mother texted in all caps without punctuation.

“D’you think we’ll finish the doc?”

Maggie shrugged. “Mister Fell says we have to, so I guess so. I don’t think Heaven’s Gate would let him out of it, anyway.”

“Oh, fair point. Well, my love... I suppose that means we are in for a mighty awkward filming session this week.”

“Ugh. We so are,” Maggie agreed, and let her phone clatter to the countertop.

She laid her forehead against it, too, in defeat. The phone buzzed again, twice in rapid succession, but she didn’t move to pick it up. Nina just laughed and patted her back.

“We’ll get through it, babe. We always do.”

Maggie hummed against the counter, half agreement and half worry. “Just... agh. Be ready. I think it’s going to be worse than awkward.”

Nina, still in her robe, pictured the campsite like a chessboard with too many queens and nowhere to move without getting taken. She drained her mug and immediately moved to refill it.

At the campsite, Nat and Newt made quick work of getting their van set up as home base for the next few days while Crowley “helped.”

Helping, here, meant a sort of moody sulk performed while carrying gear back and forth between the van and the camp proper, like a sulking ghost doing menial labor in purgatory, but that was fine as far as Nat was concerned. She wasn’t going to pry. Yet.

Aziraphale had emerged from the tent not long after they started shuffling bags around and offered to help as well. He looked entirely worse for wear—pale, puffy around the eyes, and moving like someone had turned the gravity up on just *him*—but he was putting on a brave face.

The two men took great and obvious pains not to cross paths, almost to the point of absurdity. They moved around each other in strange, stilted choreography: Crowley passing behind the chairs just as Aziraphale bent into a storage bin, Aziraphale stepping into the tent as Crowley came out with the cook kit. A couple of times they nearly collided at the folding table, and each time one of them broke off with an awkward half-smile that never met the other’s eyes.

Nat had caught Crowley thumbing through social media feeds on his phone under the guise of extremely urgent business matters more than a few times when he needed to steer clear of Aziraphale.

For Aziraphale’s part, he would periodically disappear back into the tent and do who-knows-what in there for fifteen or twenty minutes at a time when Crowley was otherwise unavoidably present.

They hadn’t spoken a single word to each other all morning. Not even a look. The air between them was a taut rope that neither of them dared to touch, in case it snapped.

After a late lunch, Nat suggested that they go scout the climb out properly. Crowley and Newt both joined her, of course, but Aziraphale begged off and made an excuse that he’d like to get a nap in.

It was true—he desperately needed a nap, having slept in only fits and starts the night before. Even lying down on the camp bed now, he could feel the grit of sleeplessness in his eyes, the dull echo in his skull from clenching his jaw for hours. He doubted he could sleep, though, even as he lay down on his bed in the tent and tried.

An ache had settled in his chest sometime between last night and this morning and now appeared to be cozying up for the long haul, like it had signed a lease.

When he’d seen Crowley just minutes earlier—hair mussed, shoulders set like a man braced against meteoric impact—Aziraphale’s first thought had been, ‘don’t speak to him, you’ll break apart faster.’ His second thought had been, ‘but he looks like you feel.’ Neither thought was helpful.

Texting with Maggie that morning had helped a bit; she always had a kind word and an uncanny ability to raise his spirits.

But as soon as Nat and Newt arrived, Aziraphale had left the tent to help them with their bags—and he saw Crowley again, of course. And that ripped the wound open fresh. Like nothing had scabbed over at all.

A small, petty part of him that he didn't like very much was gratified to see that Crowley looked like Aziraphale felt. Shit.

He truly didn't want Crowley to feel bad or guilty, though. He really didn't. The man was allowed to not want a relationship—with him or with anyone. That didn't stymie the sting of rejection one iota, though, and it certainly didn't help the bone-deep loss Aziraphale felt.

He rolled to face the tent wall so he didn't have to look at the empty space where Crowley should have been, had Aziraphale just kept his damn mouth shut.

He should have known better. Crowley couldn't have been any more clear and up front that he didn't want—he didn't *do* that. It was right there in the interview Aziraphale was present for, and that he had incontrovertible proof of, plain as day.

It could be entered as evidence in court, for Christ's sake.

He really should have known better. Maybe if he had just... not said anything? They could have at least gone on as they were.

What did he expect? That he would be the exception?

Aziraphale had always had a fatal flaw in relationships, and he knew it. He had spent hours in therapy working it out with a professional, even!

But apparently, that didn't stop him from once again looking at a broken disaster of a man with known commitment issues and a face tattoo—*Christ, Aziraphale, what were you thinking*—and proudly declaring “*I can fix him!*”

At least this one had the good sense to reject him up front and save him a few years of heartache.

He'd just been so... *so* certain that Crowley had feelings for him. Perhaps not anything groundbreaking or life-altering, but Aziraphale thought for sure that there was more between them than just the sex and the friendship.

They had been attached at the hip for months now. Crowley had a toothbrush in Aziraphale's bathroom!

And oh, that made the ache in his chest kick hard, the thought of going home and seeing Crowley's presence all over the house but not the man himself. The pillows on the living room sofa would still be dented the way that Crowley liked to sit, sideways and sprawled. The empty mug on the kitchen counter would still have his thumbprints on the glaze. It was all waiting for him, stripped of the person who made it warm.

Aziraphale had let him slip into his life—and into an easy domesticity—like a knife between the ribs.

And now that was gone.

He stared at the seam in the tent wall until the stitches blurred, his breath hitching shallow and quick. He was afraid to pull air too deeply, in case it dragged the ache open wider.

He put the travel pillow over his head to block out as much sound as he could and willed himself to sleep.

He would need the rest if he had to spend the next few days seeing Crowley, but not being able to have him.

“What did you do to him?” Nat hissed at Crowley as soon as they were out of earshot of the camp. The trail crunched under her boots, each step a sharp little metronome beat to the interrogation.

“Nat—” Crowley began warningly, but she interjected, all sternness and steel.

“Don’t even try it. Don’t you dare start that with me. You’ve been looking guilty as shit all morning, and he looks like he cried his eyes out last night.”

Crowley winced. It landed, that image, lodging like a splinter under his ribs. He didn’t want to picture it, but his brain obligingly supplied the scene anyway: Aziraphale in the dim tent light, shoulders hunched, eyes red, mouth pressed into that stubborn line he got when he was trying not to cry louder. It gutted him. He hated the thought of hurting Aziraphale.

Nat saw the discomfort in his expression and softened her own, just a little.

“What happened?” she asked, and Crowley sighed, a ragged, heart-weary thing that seemed to deflate his whole frame.

“I really, really do not want to talk about it right now. Seriously, Nat. Just leave it alone.”

She crossed her arms again, defenses back up. “I can’t leave it alone if it’s going to affect how this climb goes this week.”

“It won’t!”

Nat gave him a withering stare of utter disbelief.

“I swear it won’t, Nat, please. We just—we had a thing, yesterday, and it’s kinda messy right now but it’ll be fine, I promise.”

There was a tightness in his voice he couldn’t iron out. There was too much truth welling up under too many lies. Lies that he kept telling himself over and over, even now.

It’s for the best. It’ll be fine. He’ll get over it. You’ll get over it.

Nat still didn’t look like she believed a word he said, but Crowley could tell that she was giving in on her crusade, at least a little.

Newt, who was following behind them obediently, was conspicuously silent. He was pretending to be fascinated by the treeline, but his eyes kept flicking between the two of them like a spectator at a tennis match. He clearly didn’t want to get involved, but his pace had slowed so he could hear every word. Nat glanced at him, and something seemed to pass between the two of them, but Crowley didn’t care to figure out what.

Eventually, after a protracted and deeply uncomfortable silence in which Crowley felt very much like a schoolboy being taken to task, Nat relented and said, “You look like shit.”

Crowley laughed, but it was humorless and hollow, a sound that had forgotten what it was supposed to mean. “Thanks, it’s this new thing I’m trying where I sleep in the back of my car.”

“We brought our tent, too, just in case we wanted to sleep out in the woods. If you want it, it’s yours. I assume you two won’t be sharing tonight?”

“Probably not.”

Nat made a noise of disapproval, but nevertheless said, “Yeah. Okay. We’ll get it set up when we get back.”

“Thanks.”

She peered at him in that eerie way she had, like she was trying to read his mind through sheer force of will. It wasn’t just her eyes. She was also cataloguing the slump of his shoulders, the way his hand kept drifting to rub at the tendon in his forearm, and the twitch of his jaw when he thought she wasn’t looking. She knew every tell he had on the wall, and plenty off it. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, m’fine,” he said and hoped it sounded reassuring.

It didn’t. He didn’t even believe it himself.

“You’re a shit liar, Anthony.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Nat didn’t press any further, *thank fuck for small miracles*. “Well... let’s at least get this route worked out. Do you want to climb today?”

Crowley felt light-headed from fatigue and so, so many aches from sleeping in the fucking car, he really couldn’t fathom being anything but useless on the route just then. Every muscle felt heavy and sluggish. His hands twitched at his sides, wanting rock under them, but his brain flashed every warning light on the panel. “Nah, I didn’t sleep enough. I don’t wanna get up on the wall and be making bad decisions.”

“Smart,” Nat nodded as she pulled up the pictures Crowley had taken the day before on her phone.

“For once,” he snorted, and cracked a small smile at her.

She smiled back, and that felt a little better, despite everything. “Just this one time.”

“I’ll get some rest tonight, and we can start early tomorrow.”

“It’s a plan.”

They walked the rest of the way in a companionable enough silence, the sound of their boots on the path filling in the spaces where words wouldn’t help. Crowley kept his eyes on the wall ahead, letting its shape blot out the rest of the world.

Predictably, the rest of Sunday was awkward and stilted and full of long, meaningful pauses that Crowley despised. He and Aziraphale still hadn't spoken a word to each other. Actually, the only person he'd spoken to at all that day was Nat because Newt looked like he was living in mortal terror of Crowley's mood.

He was sitting fireside with Aziraphale now, they were chattering about... something. Crowley wasn't really paying attention to what. He was just glad that Newt and Aziraphale seemed to get on well enough. He hated the thought that Aziraphale might feel ostracized from the group or... or lonely.

Too late for that, shitheel.

Crowley grimaced and dragged his hand through his hair, and blew out a ragged breath.

Nat looked over at him from her collapsible camp chair, where she was working out climbing strategies on paper. Crowley was supposed to be doing that, too, but he couldn't focus long enough to make any meaningful headway. His brain was a foggy, scrambled mess. A damp compost heap of guilt, grief, and over-caFFEinated thoughts. He hoped Nat would pick up his slack. He didn't like to phone things in like that, but he didn't feel like himself.

"You okay?" she asked.

Crowley felt Newt and Aziraphale looking at him now, too. That particular brand of scrutiny, it made his skin itch. His flight response took the wheel.

"M'fine," he said and dropped his notebook on the ground as he stood. "Need to go look at the wall in person real quick."

"Want me to come with?"

"Nah, I shouldn't be long. Just got some climbing jitters that I need to work out."

"Okay," Nat said, but he could tell that she didn't believe a single word of his excuses. He didn't care, though; he just needed to get out of that camp for a minute.

He walked off down the trail toward the climbing wall as quickly as he could without breaking into a dead sprint like he really wanted to.

Crowley couldn't sort out his head, and that was starting to make him nervous. He had a major fucking climb to get through, and that really was not the time for relationship drama. Part of him wanted to blame Aziraphale for even bringing it up at such a critical time—he should have known better.

What a piece of shit you are to blame the guy.

He didn't want to fault Aziraphale for catching feelings. That probably couldn't be helped, ill-advised though it was to ever get too attached to someone like Crowley. But he had a lot of really prickly feelings himself, most of them tangled up in how Aziraphale decided to spring it on him like that, when he was supposed to be focusing on the biggest climb of his career to date.

As if you didn't encourage him the whole time, stringing him along like that for six fucking months, acting like his boyfriend.

They weren't, though. That was the point. Crowley had been careful about that, or so he thought. He hadn't talked about any feelings or any long-term plans. He had even been very clear, right from that first interview, that he was not a commitment guy!

Sure, they had been talking constantly. Sure, they'd been together nearly every weekend. Sure, Aziraphale had given him a drawer. Sure, he'd cooked for him. Sure, they cuddled on the couch watching shit TV.

And okay, he had never specifically told Aziraphale that what they had was just a fling, but...

My, my, my, if it isn't the consequences of your own shit decisions come back to haunt you once again. Maybe if you had stopped to examine your behavior even once, rather than barreling forward into whatever feels good with complete disregard for everyone around you, this wouldn't have happened.

He wondered whether he should talk to Aziraphale. Apologize, maybe? He wasn't sure if that would make things better or worse. The words lined up in his head, unsteady as if on bad footing:

I didn't mean—

I'm sorry I can't—

You deserve—

None of them got to the end of that rope before they slipped away. And anyway, maybe Aziraphale needed time and space to think. If that was the case, Crowley definitely didn't want to push and insert himself where he wasn't wanted. He'd already hurt the man enough.

Crowley crossed his arms and glared at the Big Climb like it had the answers to all his problems and was holding out on him.

Predictably, the wall didn't flinch.

He wondered how long he could stay out there before Nat came looking for him. It certainly would help the DEFCON 1 awkwardness-at-camp situation if he just... didn't go back. He'd bet money that Newt was already fantasizing about escape plans. The man was painfully averse to conflict, so maybe Crowley could hitch a ride with him to whatever town they were going to start a new life in.

Crowley scoffed at his own ridiculousness and resolved to try harder to be a fucking adult for once; he at least owed Aziraphale that much. So he would return to camp and not be a huffy bitch. If he couldn't be pleasant, he would be quiet and unobtrusive and not a moody wreck. If he couldn't be helpful, he would be out of the way. If he couldn't make it right, he would at least do no further harm.

Good plan.

(He didn't stomp angrily back to camp, but it was a near thing.)

The remainder of the most torturous Sunday of Crowley's life proceeded apace. They made dinner and ate around the fire that Newt was tending, and Crowley worked very hard the entire time to

blend into the scenery.

Become one with the forest. Be the tree.

Aziraphale and Nat talked about the documentary for a while, then his past work, then about climbing in general. Aziraphale was a remarkable conversationalist, and normally Crowley loved to listen to his chatter, but with the specter of the previous day looming over him like a thunderhead, hearing that warm, steady voice so close—and not for him—made his stomach churn.

So he pulled out his phone after dinner and pretended to scroll social media while he stewed, slumped down in his folding camp chair with a blanket pulled up to his ears. Turns out he was eminently capable of blowing a lot of time on sheer, mindless rumination, and the night crept up on him sooner than he thought.

He was on his second pass through his Instagram feed when he heard a quiet: “Good night, Crowley.”

Crowley froze, shocked to hear Aziraphale’s attention directed to him after a full day of radio silence. They hadn’t spoken a single word to each other since their disastrous conversation the night before.

“G’night An—Aziraphale,” Crowley replied, just barely catching himself on the now extremely inappropriate pet name, but apparently not quickly enough, if the wounded expression that flitted across the other man’s face was anything to go by.

Aziraphale didn’t call him out on it, though. He had too much kindness and grace for that, more than Crowley probably deserved. Instead, he gave him a weak smile and bid good night to Nat and Newt, then disappeared into the tent.

By that point, Crowley had more social interaction in one day than he could rightly handle, and he certainly didn’t want to try to carry on polite conversation with Nat or Newt when he was in that headspace.

“I think I’m gonna pack it in for the night, too,” he said. “I need to sleep if we’re gonna try to climb tomorrow.”

Nat raised an eyebrow at him, but nodded anyway and waved him off. “Yeah, go ahead, we can handle the fire before we tuck in.”

“Thanks,” Crowley said absently, and retreated to his tent.

Nat sighed and shared a long look with Newt. He shrugged and then pointed to their tent with a questioning look. She nodded and waved him on. She needed a minute to clear her head, and the easy, muscle-memory movements of putting out the fire were the perfect ritual. She snuffed out the fire and spread the coals, then strung up their food in a bear bag and hung it from a high tree limb near camp.

The air had that cooling, smoky smell that always came right after a campfire's last breath. The muscles in her shoulders eased fractionally with each task checked off. She tugged the rope twice to make sure the bag was secure, listened to it creak softly against the branch, and let the night noises settle in again. The crackle of cooling stones in the fire pit, the high chitter of something in the underbrush. For a moment she wished the rest of the week could be just this: small, solvable chores and no cliff faces.

Satisfied with a job well done, she brushed off her hands and walked back to her tent, unzipped the door, toed off her shoes, and slipped in. Nat zipped up the tent flap behind her and immediately sat back on her heels, rubbing both hands down her face like she was trying to wipe the day off.

Newt was already inside his sleeping bag like a content caterpillar, his headlamp illuminating the creased paperback resting on his chest. The smell of old nylon and fire smoke clung in the warm air, and their gear cast lumpy shadows against the sloping walls.

"Don't even ask," she said, flopping back onto her own sleeping bag beside him.

"I wasn't going to," he replied softly, not looking up from his book.

"You were."

"... Yeah. I was."

Nat turned her head toward him and stared at the roof of the tent. "It's bad," she said simply.

"That's the vibe I was getting from your aura."

Nat huffed out a tiny laugh and slapped his shoulder. "You're full of shit."

"Maybe. Not wrong though."

They lay in silence for a moment. Outside, the embers in the fire pit crackled. A zipper whined. Farther off, the trees rustled in the night breeze. Nat stared at the softly bouncing light from Newt's headlamp as it danced across the tent seams, like it was tracing escape routes she didn't have.

"He's not okay," Nat said finally. "Crowley."

"No kidding."

"I mean, he's really *not* okay."

Newt shifted onto his side and switched off his headlamp, plunging them into the warm press of darkness. "You gonna talk to him?"

"I tried today. Barely got anything out of him. He's not just in a mood—he's... he's off. I don't know. Scattered, I guess. And he lied to me about being ready to climb, and I *know* he knows that I know he's lying."

Newt made a contemplative noise. "Do you think he's..."

A danger to himself. That was the unspoken bit.

Nat didn't answer right away. Nat didn't answer right away. Her mind filled in the rest on its own: rope slipping through a belay plate, a foot missing a hold, the sound of nothing but rushing air where there should be a voice. She swallowed it down, but the taste of it lingered unpleasantly.

When she did though, her voice was tense. "I don't know."

Newt reached out and squeezed her hand between their sleeping bags.

"I wanted to push harder," she whispered. "Wanted to grab him by his fucking shoulders and shake some goddamn sense into him."

"But?"

"But you know how he is. Push him, and he gets all cagey. He'll pull away and go up the wall anyway just to prove he can."

"Yeah," Newt said quietly. "That sounds like him."

"I hate this," she admitted, voice cracking just slightly. "I hate not knowing if I should... should mother-hen him or drag him away from the fucking wall myself or what."

"Can I offer you a third option?"

"Go for it."

"We hide his climbing shoes and run his harness up a line into the tallest tree we can find. That'd buy us a day. Maybe two, depending on how tall the tree is."

Nat let out a surprised laugh, louder than she meant to, and immediately slapped a hand over her mouth.

"I love you, you little bastard," she said into the dark.

Newt grinned into his travel pillow. "I know."

There was another pause. Then, softly, Nat said: "Just... like, keep an eye on him tomorrow, yeah?"

Nat heard the *swish-swish* of Newt nodding his head against the fabric of his sleeping bag. "I will."

"And if I look like I'm about to let him do something stupid—"

"I'll trip him."

She laughed again, quieter this time. "Thanks."

Newt squeezed her hand once more.

The fire coals outside popped again, a sudden bright sound in the dark. Nat shut her eyes and tried to match her breathing to Newt's slow rhythm beside her, but every time she got close, an image of the climbing wall slid into her mind—vast, cold, and waiting. Inside the tent, Nat and Newt lay in uneasy silence, trying not to think too hard about everything that could go wrong.

Crowley woke on Monday morning feeling fucking hungover, which was not ideal. He had sincerely hoped that a good night's sleep would set him to rights, but he still felt like he had cotton between his ears and some sort of small woodland creature with a vicious temper trying to burrow its way out of his right temple.

Everything ached—shoulders, neck, ego.

There was nothing for it, though, because he needed to get climbing. They only had so much time out there at the crag to work on the Big Climb, and he didn't want to waste any more of it on his fucking *feelings*.

He pushed up onto his elbows and listened for the telltale sounds of Nat pattering around camp. Sure enough, she was already up and stoking the fire, good old reliable Nat. That was good luck for Crowley because he didn't want to risk getting caught alone with Aziraphale and having to address the elephant in the room, or even just sit in another excruciating silence.

He dressed quickly from his backpack and pulled up his hair. Aziraphale had told him once that he looked very handsome with his hair swept back into a half-bun like that. Crowley winced as the memory bubbled up, and had a moment of petty spite where he considered changing his hairstyle for the day, but thought better of it because he *surely* was not that much of a child, right? Right.

He popped out of his tent and waved good morning to Nat. He didn't want to wake Aziraphale if he was still sleeping, so he tried to keep quiet as he set about boiling some water for coffee.

"You don't have to keep quiet, he's already up," Nat said dryly. She always could see right through his bullshit.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. He went out for a walk a little bit ago," she said and pointed at the trailhead with her coffee mug.

"Right. Well. Ready to do this?"

"I am. Are you?" She asked with that perceptive way she had of turning questions around on him and imbuing them with more meaning than he'd prefer to read into it.

Obnoxious is what it was.

So he lied. "Yup, ready to go whenever we're done with breakfast."

She stared at him for a moment, long enough that he squirmed uncomfortably, then said, "Newt already took the gear over to the wall, so we can head over whenever."

"Great. I'll finish my coffee up and we can go. Do you want a thermos, too?"

"Please."

So Crowley boiled up some more water, filled their thermoses with their caffeine ration for the morning, and they set off for the wall.

The climbing was surprisingly easy that morning. Crowley still had enough energy from his overnight rest and the coffee to put up a good effort. Besides, the first quarter of the climb wasn't too much of a challenge in and of itself. It was a mid-grade bouldering problem to start, which was easy with fresh hands, up to the first ledge, then some fairly routine climbing techniques to scale the shitty, pebbly rock after that, even if it did eat up the skin on his palms.

He liked that, though. The sting. It was a reminder that he was still in his body, still doing something right.

Nina and Maggie arrived just before noon, camera gear and a heap of fast food in tow. They filmed a couple of good runs of the bouldering problem and the pebble wall before Crowley needed to rest and have lunch. He'd managed to avoid Aziraphale all morning, at least until that point, but as he stepped out of his harness and ever-so-subtly rearranged his junk (it wasn't subtle at all, he really went for it), Aziraphale approached with a paper bag in hand that smelled like deep-fried heaven.

"Cheeseburger and fries," he said simply, and held out the bag.

"Uh, thanks," Crowley said, and—*oh fuck he was still just holding his crotch, what the hell was that all about, way to look like a fucking weirdo, haven't you traumatized the man enough?* Crowley ripped his hand away as if scalded and took his lunch from Aziraphale.

"Don't worry, I get a little too excited about greasy fast food, too," Aziraphale teased with a smile that could almost pass for genuinely amused. At least he was making some sort of overture. Holding out an olive branch. A greasy fast-food bag shaped truce.

"Y-yeah," Crowley forced a little chuckle, but cleared his throat and seized the opportunity to clear the air. "Hey, Aziraphale, look, I just wanted to—"

"Don't."

Aziraphale's tone was soft but firm.

"It's okay, Crowley, really. I don't want this to be any more awkward than it has to be. We can be prof—professionals, get the filming done, and go our separate ways. I am not going to make a big deal of it."

Go our separate ways.

Now why the hell did that feel like a sucker punch right to the solar plexus?

His fingers went cold around the paper bag, grease coating his skin with an oily film before he even realized he was holding it too tightly. Nat's voice was saying something from somewhere behind him, but it blurred under the sound of his pulse in his ears. He forced air in past the weight on his chest.

"R-right. Yeah. Well, that's... good."

"Great. And I hope you will respect my wishes to cut back on our communication. I am going to need some space."

"Of course, yeah. Whatever you need, 'Ziraphale."

"Thank you, I appreciate it."

“No problem.”

“Well, I’m going to go eat my lunch before it gets lukewarm and inedible.”

“Right.”

Aziraphale turned away and walked off, his posture perfectly composed, just stiff enough to say *don’t follow me*.

Crowley turned around to find Nat’s ever-perceptive eyes locked on him already. She raised her eyebrows. Crowley just shrugged in response. He didn’t know what the hell to make of all that, either.

Go our separate ways. Cut back on our communication. Need some space.

Yeah, that all sounded awful.

What the fuck had he done?

After lunch, Crowley and Nat suited up again and resumed work on the climb. Crowley was starting to feel a little sluggish, probably from the mass of French fry grease settling in his gut, he figured, but he tried to push through.

Nina hung around to film while Aziraphale, Maggie, and Newt retreated to the campsite to clean up the wreckage of their fast food extravaganza and set up Nina and Maggie’s tent.

If he squinted hard and caught just the right angle through the trees, Aziraphale could see Crowley climbing the wall from the campsite, rope trailing down below him to Nat, sweat glistening on his back in the bright afternoon sun. It was too far away to tell, but Aziraphale knew what the muscles in his back and his shoulders and his arms looked like—*felt like*—and that made the ache in his chest twinge a little harder.

Every few minutes, Nat’s head tilted back to check on him, a quick jerk of the chin that was casual to anyone else but made Aziraphale’s stomach pull tight. He tried to busy himself by folding up the food wrappers for the bear bag and brushing crumbs up from the small camp table, but his eyes kept finding Crowley’s silhouette against the rock.

How was he supposed to film the rest of this documentary now that he had *and had lost* Crowley? Logically he knew the answer, the thing his therapist would say: *one day at a time, Aziraphale, you take it one day at a time*. But as he sat there by the coals of their fire and watched Crowley’s masterful command of his body, the ache of that loss felt insurmountable.

Nat yelled something up to Crowley that was too distant to make out, and Crowley yelled back. He had such a lovely voice, dark and deep, rumble when he was tired, pitchy when he was feigning indignation as he liked to do, gravelly when he was groaning into the bedsheets, breathy when he was whining and pleading for more.

Aziraphale squeezed his eyes shut and pulled in a deep breath while he willed his mind away from things he couldn't have. There was no use in rumination. He tried the slow box-breath his therapist had drilled into him, and it only made the empty part of his chest more precise. So much for that.

And anyway, there was a lot of noise coming from the rock wall. Maybe the climb was getting to a key point.

He should go take a look.

Now, Aziraphale had never really had cause to imagine what it would sound like when someone fell from a great height. He'd been fortunate so far in life, he supposed. If he had been pressed to make a guess, he probably would have said something cartoonish, like a loud scream and then a splat or a crunch.

The actual sound of Crowley plummeting from the wall wasn't cartoonish at all.

It was much quieter.

Deadly silent, even, and that made it all the more terrifying.

An illustration of a campsite in the woods with two tents. The camp is empty of people. In the distance, a large rock face looms. On the rock face are two small, barely-discernable figures, one a belayer, one obviously falling.

The first noise was a short *pop*, sharp and dry, like a tree branch snapping at a distance, coming from high above. Then a second. Then a third. Each one was closer and heavier.

Then the terrifying, continuous *zzzziiip* of rope flying through metal.

No scream. No splat. No crunch.

Just a soft, almost perversely gentle thud that barely registered as a human hitting rock.

Nat's voice came through Newt's comm handset, jittery and high. "I'm still anchored. Rope caught. I'm building a lower. He's not moving. *Fuck.*"

Newt yelled something—words that might have been "Oh, fuck!" but Aziraphale wasn't sure. By the time he registered what happened, his pulse was thudding so loudly in his temples that he couldn't hear anything else. He didn't even realize he had been sprinting toward the climbing wall until he was already bursting into the clearing at the base of the crag.

Aziraphale stared up, vision strobing around the edges with too much sun and too much adrenaline.

Crowley wasn't visible from the ground, only the rope, taut and swaying gently in the open air, like a question without an answer.

Nat was still at her anchor far above, barely visible as a tense silhouette hunched over a nest of rope and metal, clinging to the cliff face. She was shouting something that Aziraphale couldn't make out.

Crowley wasn't there. He hadn't landed at the base. He wasn't on a ledge. The rope *still held*.

So where was he?

Newt was shouting again, already halfway down the access path, phone pressed to his ear, barking words that Aziraphale couldn't understand. He heard them, but they were muffled, like deep water.

Aziraphale felt a strange detachment from the situation—the kind of floaty, out-of-body experience where you logically know that you are dissociating, but you can't stop it.

The scene petulantly refused to stay in sequence, or even obey his will to remember it at all—a flash of Crowley's laugh against his shoulder in bed; Nat's ponytail swaying as she looked up at Crowley; reading scenes from *Around the World in Eighty Days* in the library while Crowley sprawled; the rope pulled tight, straining in empty space where Crowley should have been. The part of his mind that always framed a shot tried to draw a rectangle around the memory, but the shot wouldn't hold.

Maggie—at least he thought it was Maggie, the grip was soft like hers—grabbed Aziraphale by the elbow and pulled him away. He had been standing in the middle of the path that led to the rock face, though he didn't realize it. That was the path that rescuers or... or *whoever* ... would carry Crowley's body—*Crowley*—out on. Maybe that's why Maggie pulled him away.

Nina forced Aziraphale to sit down on a rock nearby and pressed a water bottle into his hand. Someone said something reassuring. Aziraphale nodded without understanding.

Someone knelt beside him. He wasn't sure who. They started cleaning the blood from his arms and legs. He hadn't even felt it happen, but he must have run through a thicket during his sprint toward Crowley. His trousers were torn. Blood pooled just above his sock, but he didn't feel pain. There was just the heat of the sun on his neck and the sucking void inside his chest.

Oh, there was the blood. But it was his, not Crowley's.

A beetle valiantly climbed the scuffed toe of his boot and worked its way across methodically, unaware that the world had split apart.

Why wasn't there blood on the rocks below?

The water bottle in his hand was slick from condensation and impossible to hold still from all the shaking.

Why wasn't Crowley—

Where was Crowley?

His brain looped, slow and sticky.

If he fell that far, shouldn't there be... something?

He hadn't screamed. He hadn't made a sound.

Aziraphale's pulse was still pounding in his head, and it started to give him a headache. The sun was so bright overhead that it was nearly unbearable. He was *hot*, despite the early spring chill.

He must have said as much to Maggie or Nina, because the next thing he remembered was being in the backseat of their Jeep with a new water bottle in hand, driving somewhere. As the road slipped past the window in a blur, he wondered idly where they were driving.

Why hadn't Crowley screamed if he fell so far?

He wondered what they would do about the documentary if Crowley couldn't climb anymore.

Would they release it anyway? Memorialize him in it?

What if he was dead?

He wondered where Nat and Newt were, and what they were doing at that very moment.

He wondered what *they* would do if Crowley was dead.

No one had said he wasn't.

He wondered what *he* would do if Crowley was dead.

No one had said *anything*.

He wondered what the world would be like without Crowley in it.

And then, without warning, his mind supplied the image: Crowley suspended midair, slack in the harness, hair spilling over his face like a scarlet funerary shroud. The picture he imagined hit him harder than the sound of the fall had.

"P-pull—pull over, Nina, please. Quickly," Aziraphale croaked and tapped the headrest of the driver's seat urgently. His tongue tasted like pennies and fryer oil and the word 'dead' wouldn't stop touching his soft palate. Maggie turned to look at him with a worried frown, and she said something to Nina. They shared a concerned look, and Nina pulled the Jeep to the shoulder of the freeway.

Aziraphale struggled with the rope handle of the door in his panic, but managed to get the door open on the third try. He stumbled free of the Jeep and onto the grassy margin at the side of the road, staggering one, two, three steps... and he threw up.

[crowley_interview_session3_finalfinalFINAL.mp4]

After the interview wrapped up, the video lingered on Crowley's empty chair for long minutes, then cut to black.



Join us on the [Belayed Gratification Discord Server](#) for early notice of fic updates, WIPs of the illustrations as I work on them (server members see 'em first!) wild theories and speculation, pictures of rocks, an archive of the illustrations for this story, and silly conversation with other weirdos and degenerates, because that is absolutely a thing that we all needed.

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